

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Views on Islam and His Interpretation

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ABSTRACT

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar is considered a prominent intellectual figure apart from being the leader of Dalits and the chief architect of the Constitution of India. As a social philosopher, he critically evaluated the association between politics, society, and religion. For him, religion should be based on social moral principles. Ambedkar's views on religion and his involvement with it are highly rational and scientific. Several studies have been done on Ambedkar's ideas of Hinduism and his conversion to Buddhism, but Ambedkar's ideas of Islam have received narrow recognition. This paper attempts to bridge the gap by conducting a detailed examination of Ambedkar's Islamic philosophy in a systematic way. This paper also aims to evaluate his assessment of Muslim political discourse in India, his interpretation of Islam as a social and political tool, and his constitutional philosophy for dealing with various faiths.

Keywords: Religion, Islam, Caste System, Equality, Hinduism

INTRODUCTION

Ambedkar cannot be merely considered as a Dalit leader, nor solely a figurehead of all the downtrodden and oppressed classes. Through his writings, he has comprehensively described the various problems and challenges of the nation and also provided effective solutions. In his several works, Ambedkar has explained the problems of the caste system, problems of minorities and Muslims and also contributed to building a democratic, sovereign and independent India. Therefore, Ambedkar can be titled as a national leader. Ambedkar was a prominent social philosopher who evaluated the association between politics, society and religion. Ambedkar's understanding of religious doctrine was immensely scientific, intellectually advanced, and reformatory in nature. Ambedkar did not welcome any religion as it is; rather, he assessed every religion's beliefs, norms and customs on the parameters of rationality, social equality and ethical standards as well as its affinity with democracy.

Ambedkar evaluated Islam as a social and

constitutional philosopher, not as a religious scholar. He adopted a pragmatic approach in the evaluation of Islam. On one side, Ambedkar identified some principles within Islam that establish equality, such as its refusal of the caste system and the bond of fraternity among its followers. On the other hand, he questioned the customs and irrational religious norms prevailing within Islam. The political sphere within which Ambedkar constructed his insights on Islam was shaped by extensive communal disruptions, such as the development of Muslim separatist agitations and debate focused on the rights of minorities. In his work, '*Pakistan or the Partition of India*', Ambedkar has explained and examined the political sphere of Muslim in India. Ambedkar's philosophy of politics has consistently concentrated on promoting the welfare of minorities, specifically Muslims, Dalits, and other underprivileged communities. He pointed out that a democratic system is not sustainable unless it provides sufficient rights for minorities, and the dominant position of the majority in the absence of constitutional guarantees will open the door for dictatorship and despotism. Ambedkar's view on Islam is not unilateral; his analysis

of Islam is based on rational, scientific and balanced parameters. On one side, he admires the values of Islam that promote equality, but on the other, he also condemns the inequalities and hierarchical structure within Islam.

The paper aims to analyse Ambedkar's understanding of Islam in a systematic way, his evaluation of Muslim Politics in India, and his constitutional framework to achieve religious pluralism. This study would substantially enrich academic and intellectual discourse by shedding light on Ambedkar's views on religion and, more specifically, his understanding of Islam, thereby contributing to present-day interpretations of democracy, secularism, and minority rights.

Ambedkar's Views on Religion

Ambedkar holds the opinion that religion is an abstract concept without the existence of an absolute definition, considering that it has developed and progressed through multiple time frames. According to him, the notion of religion is an individual's personal visualisation in the realm of social norms associated with the existence of life and ensuring its continued existence, articulated by norms, behaviours and traditions that are designed to influence the choices and conduct of the individuals of the society (Ghadage, 2020). Ethics and morality are the basis of Ambedkar's idea of religion. He gave three standards of religion: First, Religion is required to be reasonable and consistent with the principles of science. Second, Religion must take into account the primary concepts of liberty, equality, and fraternity, and Third, Religion should not praise and consecrate poverty (Rizvi, 2023).

Ambedkar went through the thoughts of several Indian as well as Western philosophers in order to understand the role of religion in reshaping the societal frameworks. Ambedkar critically interpreted the ideas of these thinkers and did not embrace ideas of any thinker as it was. He supported this point of their ideas that religion ought to concentrate on the social interactions between the individual as compared to emphasising mainly on the divine power, spirit and the realm of immortality, and he considered this was a significant and fundamentally essential step towards establishing a stronger egalitarian and equal level-headed nation. Ambedkar did not see religion as a matter of the private sphere; rather, he considered it as a social aspect. In his notion of true religion, he equated religion with *Dhamma* and argued that *Dhamma* is centred on building ethical connections

with fellow humans, rather than on performing customary practices or having an attachment to a divine being (Edelglass, 2023).

A comprehensive understanding of Indian traditions and religious beliefs can be found in Ambedkar's critique of the caste system. Ambedkar points out that the caste system has been derived from cultural beliefs that experienced contamination primarily by institutions of faith. He continued to argue that the notion of caste is a classification structure based on the divisions of labourers ranked one above the other in hierarchy instead of simply just a division of labourers (Awad, 2022). Ambedkar had a different view from the Marxist thinkers, who believed that religion held an unnecessary position in the life of an individual. Although Ambedkar criticised the Hindu religion because of the social and religious inequalities and discrimination it promotes, he advocated a religion based on just values, i.e., equality, liberty, and fraternity, because, for him, religion inculcates aspirations and encourages the individual to act (Maheshwarappa M, 2018).

Ambedkar establishes a connection between the untouchables and the Hindu religion and argues that, simultaneously, it was both integration and debarment. Amid various social norms and values, Hinduism includes the untouchables, yet these norms and regulations exclude them from fundamental services and rights (Stausberg, 2020). Ambedkar did not denounce the prevalence of Hinduism or Hindu religious figures, but in fact opposed its erroneous and bogus principles; he argued that Hinduism is an unethical and unjust religion (P.Vijaya Kumar, 2021). Ambedkar suggested to the downtrodden class that, before accepting a position in the Hindu religion, they should ask for an extensive and serious reconstruction of the Hindu principles and notions (Stausberg, 2020). Ambedkar held the view that rejecting Hinduism is justifiable because it was standing on the pillars of unfairness and prejudices. In Hinduism, it is theologically permissible to consider an individual as lower or upper in social hierarchy, as determined by their birth in a certain caste (Ghadage, 2020). Ambedkar looked at the conversion from Hinduism is problem resolving step for the depressed class. He formulated a recitation in Marathi at the All-Bombay District Mahar Conference, May 1936, in which he argued that- "*Religion is for man; man is not for religion*". Addressing the Untouchable, he writes that "*if you want to gain humanity, change your religion. If you want to create*

a cooperative society, change your religion” (Stausberg, 2020).

The framework of caste in Hinduism deeply impacted the mind-set and thoughts of Ambedkar. He argued that the caste structure is a structure of ‘*graded inequality*’ that has legitimacy by Hindu customs, norms and practices. The lower strata in this graded hierarchical structure experience the erosion of their socio-economic entitlements and also the dilution of human dignity relative to the strata just preceding them. Ambedkar’s solution for this problem was mass conversion. After renouncing Hinduism, Ambedkar immersed himself in studying and examining Buddhism before the mass conversion (Rizvi, 2023). Ambedkar took the path to strongly abandon Hinduism after getting stuck in challenging circumstances, endeavouring to actually carry out substantial modifications inside the solid foundation of the Hindu societal system. Ambedkar points out the significance and necessity of conversion and states that-

“According to me, this conversion of religion will bring happiness to the Dalits and to the Hindus. So long as you remain Hindu, you will have to struggle for social intercourse, for food and water and for inter-caste marriages...by conversion, the roots of the quarrel will vanish...This path of conversion is the only right path of freedom which ultimately leads to equality” (Lal, 2023).

When we put the flash of torch on Ambedkar’s thoughts on Buddhism, then we come to an understanding that for Ambedkar Buddhism was a scientific and rational religion which allowed expressing one’s thoughts without any religious obstacle. In the view of Ambedkar, Buddhism does not encourage superstitions. He appreciated Buddhism more than any other religion because it was a religion which was based on principles holding the ideas of ‘*liberty, equality and fraternity*’ (Edelglass, 2023). It can be believed that conversion to Buddhism was a refusal of the unjust and inhumane customs of the Hindu religion. Conversion is regarded as a liberating tool from the discriminatory orthodox religious notions, and conversion to Buddhism is considered a decisive step towards a dignified life based on equality (Ghadage, 2020). Conversion to Buddhism was an effort to redesign and culturally construct the section of untouchables by effectively disregarding the power and supreme dominance of the culturally established Hindu religion supremacy (Awad, 2022).

After examining the norms and principles of

Buddhism, Ambedkar concluded that Buddhism is based on the principles of egalitarianism and is the highest pillar of morality. He called all human beings from all the castes to adopt Buddhism, and also divine personalities to embrace Buddhism in their notions of routine, which guarantees a fair chance for everyone without any bias (Kumar, 2019). For Ambedkar, adopting Buddhism was an entirely fresh route for self-liberation and identity of Dalits. As a result, people on a large scale from the Mahar and Chamar communities in Maharashtra and from Jatavs in Uttar Pradesh adopted this conversion in the period of 1956-57. Conversion was not limited to Ambedkar only, but this new path of Ambedkar consistently encouraged many future generations to go through. Dalits considered conversion as a means to depart from their earlier identity and to colour themselves with the paint of modernity (Lal, 2023).

Ambedkar’s method of studying religion was comparative instead of selective. He stayed away from criticising or glorifying any particular religion; he applied a uniform logical analysis to all the religious faiths. Ambedkar found that due to its progress through multiple time frames, religion has no specific or settled meaning. For him, the most profound principles of equality, fraternity, and liberty should strive to be explicitly embedded within faith-based organisations’ standard practices, behaviours, and everyday affairs instead of simply being preached and understood in (Webster, 2002).

In a nutshell, Ambedkar’s notion of religion had its foundation in rational thinking, ethical principles, and an equitable society. As stated by him, religion is a strong and influential societal organisation that must continue to be committed to moral guidelines and the spirit of democracy. Ambedkar’s critical views on Hinduism can be considered as an essential keystone for examining his perspective on Islam. He revealed how religious structures can authorise inequality, and this laid a foundation that he executed uniformly and universally on all religions.

Ambedkar’s Interpretation of Islam

Ambedkar’s interpretation of Islam was heavily influenced by his comprehensive philosophical insight, which considers religion as a political and socially constructed discipline. He did not see Islam through the lens of a religious scholar; instead, Ambedkar considered Islam as a social structural framework that affects the behaviour, political awareness, and shared identity of its

devotees. His understanding of Islam was further determined by his comparative approach, which Ambedkar adopted to examine the various religions. Ambedkar believed that the most fundamental aspect of Islam is its strong emphasis on humanity that promotes the idea that everyone ought to honour humanity and nobody should behave with another person unfairly or disrespectfully. Ambedkar argued that Islam also contains casteism; however, the caste systems of Hinduism and Islam significantly differ from one another. Ambedkar pointed out that the caste structure of Hinduism is deeply rooted in the Hindu religion, while there is no religious foundation for caste structure in Islam. Hindu religion will firmly stand as a barricade if Hindus decide to dismantle the caste system. In contrast, the belief system of Islam will not hinder Muslims from organising a campaign to eradicate the caste system in their community. Hindus are unable to abolish their caste system without discarding their belief system. Certainly, it is not required for Muslims to demolish their faith to eliminate the caste structure (Mungekar, 2017). Ambedkar pointed out that considerable social hierarchies were also present in the Indian Muslim community. But these hierarchies based on ancestral lineage and professional status were not legitimised by Islam like the caste system in Hinduism.

Ambedkar assessed that a very strong bond of fraternity exists in Islam among its followers. Ambedkar flagged an issue regarding such solid communal bonding. He argued that extreme faith-based unity and solidarity can be dangerous for the political integration of the country, because Ambedkar had observed the historical background of Islam as a political force. According to him, this past legacy had developed political awareness and a sense among the Muslims. He examined this component by paying great attention, notably with regard to the Muslim demands for a separate nation and freedom throughout the days of colonialism. He considered the proposal for a separate state as the pinnacle of communal political philosophy. Despite the fact that he understood the reasoning behind this proposal, he inquired about the extent to which it actually benefited Muslims in the long run. Ambedkar's viewpoint on Muslim political organisation was basically developed by his faithful towards constitutionalism. He believed that political organisation should operate within a constitutional framework that shields individual rights and paves the path for social justice. According to Ambedkar, religious

identity should not overrule constitutional authority (Ambedkar, 1945). Ambedkar's perspectives on Muslim political associations are a demonstration of his comprehensive philosophy of politics, which highlights constitutional ethical principles, minority safeguards and democratic representation.

Another aspect related to Islam on which Ambedkar focused was the issue of minorities. He identified that Indian Muslims were scared of their exclusion and banishment in a Hindu-majority populated state. An interesting point to know here is that Ambedkar considered Dalits also as a minority in addition to the religious minorities like Muslims, Christians and Sikhs. Additionally, he pointed out why Dalits are entitled to be designated as a minority status. He provided two reasons for this; first, prejudicial behaviours carried out against Dalits by Hindus and second, Dalits did not share religious recognition with Hindus. Ambedkar argued that for India to establish itself as an actual democracy, all minorities must be granted appropriate representation in political affairs in democratic organisations (Husain, 2025).

Ambedkar questioned the religious dogmatism prevailing in Islam; the religious customs and laws can influence the social and political conduct of its believers. According to him, the unrestrained and unquestionable nature of the Islamic religious system has become an obstacle in the path of individual autonomy. Ambedkar pointed out that religious rigidity in Islam has the potential to restrict the rights of women and can hinder marginalised individuals from claiming the right of equality. Ambedkar's critique of Islamic orthodoxy was positive in nature because he suggested that religious practices should be aligned with the principles of social justice and constitutional morality, and reform in Islam should be guided by the notions of morality and egalitarian ideas. Ambedkar raised concerns about the practices of Islam religion, such as polygamy, child marriages and the purdah system and pointed out the impact of these practices on Muslim women. Ambedkar argued that Muslims did not acknowledge and identify the social evils of Islam religion; Muslims were against any reform in the religious structures of Islam. Therefore, he suggested that reform within Islam would not be done by the state or any government, but religious scholars had an ethical obligation to do so and to promote gender equality, because advancement of women's empowerment was crucial for the betterment of democracy and installation of a just and fair society (Ambedkar, 1945).

In a nutshell, Ambedkar's perception and his point of view about Islam were multifaceted, critically evaluated and highly analytical. He examined Islam on the same rational and ethical standards that he used universally for each religion. He adopted a pragmatic and balanced approach in analysing Islam. He did not portray Islam as potentially hazardous to democracy or glorify it as a magnificent, fair and equal faith. Ambedkar's assessment of Islam and social fairness illustrates his constant adherence to examining religions from the viewpoint of an equitable society and respect for human dignity. Ambedkar appreciated the absence of the caste system in Islam and solidarity among its followers, as well as criticised the social stratification in Muslim society. This was a stabilised approach adopted by Ambedkar in the analysis of Islam, which offers an essential base for understanding his stands on democracy and Muslim political affairs.

Conclusion

B.R. Ambedkar's interaction with Islam highlights his comprehensive political thought process, which has its foundation in reason, an equitable society, and constitutional democratic principles. He examined Islam on the standards of equality, democratic governance and human dignity. Ambedkar's study of Islam also demonstrates the way he managed to be impartial and equitable. He did not devalue Islam to a matter of harsh criticism or glorify it as an absolute ideal. In contrast, he demonstrated its positive and negative aspects and suggested appropriate, reasonable, and realistic reform techniques. In present-day India, where discourses related to religion, minority rights, equal treatment for women, and representation in politics maintain to influence society, Ambedkar's assessments and thoughts are still relevant and applicable in today's India.

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