

Dr. Ambedkar's encounter with Buddha- "Ambedkrite Buddhism as liberation Theology"

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Abstract—My presentation is about the search for alternative faiths that made Ambedkar think and finally adopt Buddhism. Ambedkar's search was not about religion but about his encounter with a religion, which would sent the needs of the untouchables of Hinduism.

I. A SEARCH FOR ROOTS

"Hindus can be ranked among those cruel people whose utterances and acts are two poles apart. They have this Ram on their tongues and a knife under their armpits. They speak like saints but act like butchers..."

What is a Religion? Ambedkar never understand the actual meaning of Religion. He remembered the stories from 'Ramayana' and 'Mahabharata', of Rama and Krishna, of decorum and justice. He frequently used to enquire about their existence; whether there was a different Rama and Krishna for the 'Blue-blooded' and for the 'Base-born'.

The another doubt he had about his own identity was, whether he himself was Hindu? Since childhood he called himself a Hindu, but he saw that there were different standard of conduct within Hinduism. The thought which left him in a state of dilemma, was Hinduism a religion or was it an atrocity to manipulate the ungenteele or to create slavery.

Because he was never allowed to walk peacefully on the road or to move into the society. He was marginalized everywhere. The fragmented Religion made him think to redefine the definition of Hinduism because for him Religion must give you strength, social harmony, happiness but here in his case he experienced religion to give him oppression, segregation and it marginalizes him.

The influence of Buddhism on Ambedkar can be traced back much earlier. The earliest beginning was in 1908 when he was presented by K.A. Keluskar's who was an assistant teacher at the Wilson High School and his father's friend (Kaka), who often met Ambedkar and allowed him access to his rather large library, gifted 'Buddha Charita - Life of Buddha' in Marathi, which had a great influence on him. Buddha and his teachings left a deep impression over the life of Ambedkar, especially the philosophy of Buddha which is based on three pillars- 'Pragya, Samta and Karuna'. He was inspired by the statement of Buddha in Buddha Charita, "Like birds collecting on a tree in the night and then going their separate ways in the morning, the union of all beings inevitably end in separation."

During the college days he, for a second time, got a chance to hear a lecture on Buddha by the same teacher. These influences left him in a contemplative mood. The effort of Ambedkar for the forced entry in 'Kala Ram Temple' in 1930, to challenges religious laws and enter a Hindu Temple in Nasik, another step against the Hegemony of Brahmins and the proof of his disenchantment with Hinduism.

"It is not true that entry into Hindu temple will solve your whole problem. Our problem is very broad. It extends into the political, social, religious and economic sphere. Today's Satyagraha is a challenge we shall see whether Hindu Society is ready to treat us as human being."

He kept a White colored statue of Lord Buddha, white in color, at the entrance of his house, called 'Rajgriha', which he built in 1932.

II. THE PATH FOR SALVATION

In 1929, Ambedkar presented his proposal before 'Simon Commission' in co-operating the rights of untouchables and declared to support British government in Round Table Conference (if) in the first session they promised to safeguard their rights. Congress and Gandhi opposed it and Gandhi wrote to Sir Samuel Hoare and the Secretary of The State of India,

"For me religion is one is essence, but it has many branches and if I, the Hindu branch, fail in my duty to the parent trunk, I am an unworthy follower of that on indivisible visible religion..... my nationalism and my religion are not exclusive, but inclusive and they must be consistently with the welfare of my life."

In another letter to Prime Minister 'Ramsay Mac Donald' in September 1930, Gandhi wrote, "In the establishment of separate electorate at all for the 'depressed class', I sense the injection of poison that is calculated to destroy Hinduism".

The statement came during the first Round Table Conference's first session. Congress and their sole representative 'Gandhi' decided to boycott the session on the issue of the 'separate electoral', advocated by 'Ambedkar'. The statement immediately placed Ambedkar under the pressure because by the time it was clear that masked Congress was not in a mood to discuss this issue and their 'massiha' was ready to use his weapon of fasting and Ahimsa against him. As Ambedkar stated, "This was nothing but a declaration of a war by Mr. Gandhi and the Congress against the untouchables." Proposal were also made to adjourn the talks in between of Ambedkar and Gandhi, outside on the issue of minorities and fabricated with the colors of Hindu-Muslim questions. The clash in between of Ambedkar and Congress reached to a conclusion

¹<http://www.angelfire.com/ak/ambedkar/BRwhyconversion.html>.

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according to which the separate electoral demand was replaced with the special concession for the 'Depressed Class'.

The democratic presentation by Ambedkar in Round Table Conferences and the later discussions with Gandhi sparked a ray of disenchantment for Hinduism in Ambedkar and built a hitch for the mask-men who were ready to pour their poison at the name of caste and Hinduism. Somewhere these sessions and the fang of Gandhi helped Ambedkar to rethink the issue of conversion. He started to think that the untouchables were not having any future under Hinduism and conversion is the only solution of this discreteness. The thoughts got histrionic expression and a sheer change in his ideology was witnessed when he thunderously burst with a declaration on October, 13, 1935, in Yeola Conference—"Because we have the misfortune of calling ourselves Hindu, we are treated thus.... We shall repair our mistakes now. I had the misfortune of being with the stigma of an untouchable. However, it is not my fault; but I will not die a Hindu, for this is my power." The actual conversion took place on November, 14, 1956, but the intervening period of 20 years had been one of the intense introspection, questioning and a tortuous process of decision making for this burdened man in the midst of his other numerous social, public and political engagements.

"In constant interaction with a large number of people, over informal and formal meetings, Ambedkar was working out a rationale and evolving a conscious, consistent and coherent formula for collective action".

In 1935, at Nasik District, Maharashtra, Dr. Ambedkar presented his firm resolve of conversion. Elaborating and conjugating the idea of 'Conversion', Ambedkar, while addressing a 'Mahar' conference in Kalyan (May, 17, 1936), said, Ambedkar, nostalgically referred three incidents of his life when after getting the western education, he came back and he first learned an unforgettable lesson of his life of untouchability in Satara, where a barber denied to cut his hair because of his caste. Journey to Goregaon was another encounter when the cart puller straightly denied to allow them as the passengers in his cart because of their caste and later on throughout their journey maintained a gap. Even they were straightly denied for food, water and shelter. The most pathetic encounter with the curse and atrocity was by a group of Parsis in Parsi inn, Baroda. Ambedkar miserably failed to arrange a shelter and with the tears in his eyes tendered his resignation and left for Bombay. These horrible incidents squeaked him the bitter essence of Casteism and most importantly the meaning of being an untouchable. These humiliations and zest for self-respect imposed him and his degrees and questioned seemed un-hinge. In the struggle for the emancipation of the mahars and their social rights, Ambedkar came to the conclusion that Hinduism as a way of life can't be the best way of life for the low caste people, so it should be denounced. The address clearly showed his segregated soul. In a Mahar Sabha at Dader on May 31, 1936, he seemed more clear for the emancipation by coming out from the shell of materialistic caste division. In the same year, when a Hindu reformist group invited Dr. B.R. Ambedkar to address its annual lecture and when the group read an advance copy of the text of the speech, it found the contents "unbearable" and rescinded its invitation. Ambedkar published the text himself as

'Annihilation Of Caste'. It offers a scholarly critique of the Vedas and shastras—scriptures the Hindus regard as sacred, scriptures that sanction the world's most hierarchical social system.

"Caste was implied in people's names, in the way people referred to each other, in the work they did, in the clothes they wore, in the marriages that were arranged, in the language they spoke. Even so, I never encountered the notion of caste in a single school textbook. Reading Ambedkar alerted me to a gaping hole in our pedagogical universe."

— B.R. Ambedkar, Annihilation of Caste

Now, the dilemma was how and where to build a concrete road for his people. Ambedkar's period of search was probably the longest and touchy period to ultimate his decision to embrace Buddhism. "Buddha stood for social freedom, intellectual freedom, economic freedom and political freedom. He taught equality, equality not between man and man only but between man and woman."

Why Buddhism –

In 1946 he built a college in Bombay and named it as 'Siddhartha College' in 1948. His arrangements for the publication of book 'The Essence of Buddhism' by Prof. P. Lakshmi Narasu, in 1950, showed his clear attraction for Buddhism. It took 20 years for him to cover the distance of religion gap and to embrace Buddhism but his research during these 20 years, determined him about conversion. These years realized him that it's only Buddhism could be the way for the emancipation of Dalit. During a press conference, when he was asked about his conversion and especially about his conversion as a Buddhist, he replied,

"A Dharma is an impersonal event which belongs to no person or individual, but just goes along on its own way. It was regarded as a most praiseworthy achievement on the part of a Buddhist monk if he succeeded in accounting to himself for the contents of his mind with the help of these impersonal dharmas, of which tradition provided him with definite lists, without ever bringing in the nebulous and pernicious word "I"."

Ambedkar very keenly observed the aspects of Buddhism and other religions. In his paper, "Why Conversion", he stated very comprehensively the causes of oppression and the emancipatory methods to come out and live a dignified and independent life with grace.

(Because the principals of Buddhism emphasize on Equality, because the sermons of Buddha will remain Modern, Contemporary and logical. These are not atrocious. If you want to live logically and happily, Buddhism is the only choice. The other religion portraits their 'Massihahs' but Buddha never claimed, himself an 'Avatar' but as a 'path-definer'. As per as other religions are considered, Ambedkar didn't deny for their sovereignty but the fragmentation didn't sound just for the Dalits because there also the possibility of their marginalization quite high.)

"Whatever I have described above is correct then you will have to agree with the conclusion that follows. The conclusion

is, if you depend only upon your own strength, you will never be able to face the tyranny of the Hindus. I have no doubt that you are oppressed because you have no strength. It is not that you alone are in minority. The Muslims are equally small in number. Like Mahar- Mangs, they too have few houses in the village. But no one dares to trouble the Muslims while you are always a victim of tyranny. Why is this so? Though there may be two houses of Muslims in the village, nobody dares to harm them, while the whole village practices tyranny against you though you have ten houses. Why does this happen? This is a very pertinent question and you will have to find out a suitable answer to this. In my opinion, there is only one answer to this question. The Hindus realize that the strength of the whole of the Muslim population in India stands behind those two houses of Muslims living in a village and, therefore, they do not dare to touch them. Those two houses also enjoy free and fearless life because they are aware that if any Hindu commits aggression against them, the whole Muslim community from Punjab to Madras will rush to their protection at any cost. On the other hand, the Hindus are sure that none will come to your rescue, nobody will help you, no financial help will reach you.”

He was quite determined on the question of dignity and emancipation. For him the emancipation of this slavery is not possible by the time the surpassers would not raise them and get ready to fight. Ambedkar’s close observation of the society and his degrees helped him a lot to think with social, economical and political aspects. At the end of the paper, ‘Why Conversion’, he mentioned clearly the cause -

“ To get human treatment, convert yourselves.

CONVERT -For getting organized.

CONVERT -For becoming strong.

CONVERT -For securing equality.

CONVERT -For getting liberty.

CONVERT -For that your domestic life may be happy.”

Prototypes of conversions

Is the conversion like changing of clothes? its a serious project, needed intrinsic research. History witnessed that Ambedkar was not the first to decide for conversion for the emancipation several examples are available in the history, because the Varna vyavastha doesn't allow everyone to perform the religious practices. And its not an Indian phenomena or not an example set in India only. In 18th century, the German Missionaries came to Madras(Chennai) to convert the “lower class people because they used the Telegu in their religious preaching and propaganda” and “the tracts distributed by the Missionaries were favorably received by those who could read.” Mala Dasaris , was the earliest person to convert into a new religion.

Nagas are considers as the great warriors of the hills. Their practices are like the other tribes like hunting and it was considered as institutionalized violence in the way of socialism. So a mass conversion into Christianity was targeted and Mackenzie(1884) mention that Rev. Miles Bronson, An American, resided among the Nagas, teaching them Christianity and the art of cultivating Tea in between of 1842-1852. In 1840, he established a missionary school for the Naga children to teach them English and preached them Christianity .

The conversion in Christianity was a development program designed by the colonizers as a mission among the depressed class. But after the declaration in Yeola Conference researched upto 20 years for a better option. Meanwhile, being a part of the parliament and various political bodies, he got a chance to visit different places and there he analyzed very keenly the pre and post aspects and deviations of different religions. Buddhism, since his early age impacted a lot because of it freedom, individual identity, undivisionability and most importantly because of its sermoniasation.

In 1950 he not only praised the Buddha at the expense of Krishna, Christ, and Muhammad but also visited Ceylon at the invitation of the Young Men’s Buddhist Association, Colombo, addressed a meeting of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Kandy, and appealed to the Untouchables of Ceylon to embrace Buddhism. In 1951 he defended the Buddha against the charge that he had been responsible for the downfall of the Indian woman and compiled the Bauddha Upasana Patha, a small collection of Buddhist devotional texts. Thus when his resignation from the Cabinet, and his failure to secure election to the Lok Sabha, finally left Ambedkar with the time and energy for his greatest achievement, the ground was already well prepared.

In 1954 he twice visited Burma, the second time in order to attend the third conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Rangoon. In 1955 he founded the ‘Bharatiya Bauddha Mahasabha’ or Indian Buddhist Society and installed an image of the Buddha in a temple that had been built at Dehu Road, near Poona. Addressing the thousands of Untouchables who had assembled for the occasion, he declared that henceforth he would devote himself to the propagation of Buddhism in India. He also announced that he was writing a book explaining the tenets of Buddhism in simple language for the benefit of the common man. It might take him a year to complete the book, but when it was finished he would embrace Buddhism. The work in question was The Buddha and His Dhamma, on which he had been working since November 1951 and which he completed in February 1956. Not long afterwards Ambedkar, true to his word, announced that he would be embracing Buddhism in October of that year. Arrangements were accordingly made for the ceremony to be held in Nagpur, and on 14 October 1956 the Untouchable leader took the Three Refuges and Five Precepts from a Buddhist monk in the traditional manner and then in his turn administered them to the 380,000 men, women, and children who had come to Nagpur in response to his call.

Buddha and his teachings left a deep impression over the life of Ambedkar. He was inspired by the statement of Buddha in Buddha Charita, “If you believe in living a respectable life, you believe in self-help which is the best help”. But rather then to follow the old practices in modern reference he decided to give it another name. He never claimed that it was his religion or he was an incarnation and that’s why he addressed it Dhamma, which is known as Navayana.

“Gary Tartakov’s article notes that Ambedkar called his Buddhism Navayana. Navayana is not “neo”; it is a fourth vehicle (yana) among Buddhism’s traditional three. Ambedkar’s Buddhism, as many of the book’s authors argue, is based on a deep study of Buddhist texts and scholarly writings about them,

just as The Buddha and His Dhamma is organized around a profound understanding of events in the Buddha's life, as Eleanor Zelliot's article notes." Many of the arguments suggest that Ambedkar did not intend Navayana for Dalits only, but its neo-Buddhism, for the Depressed classes from all over the world. He meant it as a universal message for all humanity. The goal of Ambedkar was individual and collective emancipation from non-rational thought and unjust social difference. Ambedkar's Buddhist discourse is based on "justice," The comprehensive meaning of meaning this word is, 'liberty, equality, and fraternity'. Some, therefore, say that Navayana is mostly repackaged Western liberal thought. For some, the conversion is actually a formation of a new community. Yet, Ambedkar said that he had learned everything about those words' meaning from the Buddha. Eugenia Yurolova's article, adverts to Ambedkar's statement, "equality has no value without liberty and fraternity, that the three must coexist and do so only by following the Buddha's way". "Ambedkar", Yurolova says, "felt that democracy was the best form of government but not in its Western form, in which liberty had swallowed equality, producing class difference and a market ideologically supported by social Darwinism". According to the critics, Ambedkar's 'Navayana' is an effort to commune contemporary India's struggle between meritocracy (liberty) and reservations (equality and freedom). The another purpose of the formation of a new religion is to reconstruct a religion and introduce the readers of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Buddhist movements. "G. Aloysius's article succinctly illuminates Pandit Iyothee Thass's 1898 establishment in Tamilnadu of Sakya, later the South Indian Buddhist movement. While similar to Ambedkar's Buddhism in ideas and goals, it tantalizingly differed in one respect. Sakya had an earthbound transcendent God: "those men and women who followed the path of righteousness and wisdom and lived a life of total selflessness, and thus through their own character, conduct and life-contribution had become indispensable to and immortal in the lives of successive generations"

Buddha and Dhamma

"The religion of Buddha has the capacity to change according to times, a quality which no other religion can claim to have..."

Now what is the basis of Buddhism?"

In his 'The Buddha and His Dhamma', Ambedkar had tried to make a distinction between religion and Dhaka. According to him, "the word 'Religion' is an ambiguous word with more than one meaning. This is so because religion has passed through many ages and the concentration of religion, too, has changed accordingly. At early stage, religion was identify with the magic. In the second stage, religion came to be identified with beliefs, rituals, ceremonies, prayers and sacrifices. In the third stage religion means, "beliefs in God, beliefs in soul, worship of God, curing of the erring soul, propitiating God by prayers, ceremonies, sacrifices, etc."

According to Ambedkar, What the Buddha calls dhamma differs fundamental from what is called religion. Religion, it is said, is personal and one must keep it to oneself. One must not let it play its part in public life.

"It is difficult to define religion. However, it may be described as "man's faith in a power beyond himself", or "a belief in an Everlasting God", who manages the affairs in the world, and gives reward or punishment to human beings according to their acts (karmas). It is also said to be "a fantastic reflection in people's minds of external forces dominating over them in every day life, a reflection in which earthly forces assume non-earthly forms."

According to the statement dhamma is Karma. Dhamma is righteousness, which means right relation between human being in all spheres of life. We, as a part of a society as well as an individual even, should follow the practices of a dhamma whether you like it or not. In other words, society Ambedkar says, can not sustains without dhamma. Society has to choose one of the three alternatives. First, Society should choose any dhamma, which can be the base root of a government. Secondly, society may chooses the police, that is, dictatorship as an instruments of government. Thirdly, society may chooses dhamma plus the magistrate wherever people fail to observe the dharma, as an instrument of government. In anarchy and dictatorship, liberty is lost. Liberty can survive only if we accept the third alternative. Therefore, concluding Ambedkar, those who want liberty must accept dhamma. According to Buddha, dhamma consists of 'Prajna'(understanding) and 'Karuna'(love). Thus, says Ambedkar, the definition of Dhamma, according to the Buddha, is different from the definition of religion.

Ambedkar has also discussed 'Varna - vyavastha' in 'The Buddha and His Dhamma'. According to the brahminical doctrine, says Ambedkar, acquisition of knowledge can not be the right of any caste or 'varna'. But all have equal right to acquire knowledge. All women and all Shudras, even should not be prohibited from acquiring knowledge. The Buddha, according to Ambedkar, atrociously oppose this doctrine of Brahmins.

In 'Buddha and His Dhamma, Ambedkar clearly mentioned the practices accepted and ordered to follow by Prince Siddhartha to pull down all social barriers between human being. According to the Brahmins, the Vedas have defined the society, so everyone should follow the guidelines of these scare texts. The ideal society, prescribed by Vedas, is known as 'Chaturvarna'. A 'Varna-vyavastha' which is like a pyramid, having a composition of four classes. Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras, The inter-relation of these classes must be regulated with the principle of graded inequality. In other words, the Shudras are situated at the bottom and other three classes acquire the top three positions- The Brahmins were placed at the top; the Kshatriyas were placed below the Brahmins, the Vaishyas were after the Kshatriyas and the Shudras were place lowest to all. Third features of 'Chaturvarna' was that each class must engage itself in a specific occupation. The Brahmin's occupation was to learn, teach and officiated religious ceremonies. The Kshatriyas occupation was to bear arms and fight. The occupation of Vaishyas was trade and business. The Shudras's occupation was to do menial and filthy services for all the three superior class. No class is allowed to transgress each others occupation. It means they were having the specification of their profession

which was the cause of creating inequality and even sustaining it. The Buddha was totally opposed to this system. Buddha was never stated any caste based statement. Many Brahmins challenged Buddha on this issue but he silenced them completely. The another aspect of the theory of Chaturvarna was that it was based on birth. The worth of a man, according to the Brahmins, was based on birth and nothing else.

“Unlike a drop of water which loses its identity when it joins the ocean, man does not lose his being in the society in which he lives. Man's life is independent. He is born not for the development of the society alone, but for the development of his self too.”

— ***B.R. Ambedkar, Writings And Speeches***

According to Ambedkar, there is only on religion which is sermonized by Buddha and that is ‘Humanity’.

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