

Buddhist Liberation in India and B.R. Ambedkar

B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), who was born in an “untouchable” community known as mahar, carried on a relentless battle against untouchability throughout his adult life. In the last part of his life, he renounced Hinduism and became a Buddhist. Ambedkar believed that the untouchables occupied a “weak and lowly status” only because they were a part of the Hindu society. When attempts to gain equal status and “ordinary rights as human beings” within the Hindu society started failing, Ambedkar thought it was essential to embrace a religion which will give “equal status, equal rights and fair treatment” to untouchables. He clearly said to his supporters “select only that religion in which you will get equal status, equal opportunity and equal treatment.”

Evidently, after a comparative study of different religions, Ambedkar concluded that Buddhism was the best religion. He felt that the propagation of Buddhism needed a Bible. Apparently, Ambedkar wrote *The Buddha and his Dhamma* to fulfill this need. Besides, he pointed out, unlike the founders of other religions who considered themselves emissaries of god; the Buddha regarded himself only as a guide and gave a revolutionary meaning to the concept of religion. He said that Hinduism stood for inequality, whereas Buddhism stood for equality.

In May 1956, a talk by Ambedkar titled “Why I like Buddhism and how it is useful to the world in its present circumstances” was broadcast from the BBC, London. In his talk Ambedkar said: “I prefer Buddhism because it gives three principles in combination, which no other religion does. Buddhism teaches *prajñā* (understanding as against superstition and supernaturalism), *karuṇā* (love), and *samata* (equality). This is what man wants for a good and happy life. Neither god nor soul can save society.” In his last speech delivered in Bombay in May 24 1956, in which he declared his resolve to embrace Buddhism, Ambedkar observed: “Hinduism believes in God. Buddhism has no God. Hinduism believes in soul. According to Buddhism, there is no soul. Hinduism believes in *caturvarṇa* and the caste system. Buddhism has no place for the caste system and *caturvarṇa*.” Ambedkar not only appealed to the Indian dalits to convert to Buddhism, but also did so to the Sri Lankans as well. As reported by Keer: “Ambedkar... addressed a meeting in the town hall at Colombo and appealed to untouchables there to embrace Buddhism. He told them that there was no necessity of their having a separate organization. He also urged Buddhists in Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was known at that time) to accept the depressed classes in Ceylon and look after their interests with paternal care.”¹ “Ambedkar also declared that he would propagate Buddhism in India when equipped with proper means for the task. As maker of the Constitution, he had already achieved several things to that end. He described the provision for the study of Pali made in the Constitution, the inscription of a Buddhist aphorism on the frontage of the imposing Rashtrapati Bhawan in New Delhi, and the acceptance of the Ashok Chakra by Bharat as her symbol, as personal achievements. Government of India had declared Buddha Jayanty a holiday mainly through his efforts... Besides, he had established two colleges, one at Bombay and the other at Aurangabad, where about 3,400 students were studying and where he could encourage Buddhism.”² In 1960, over 20 Hindu temples were converted into Buddhist temples by the dalits of Agra region.³

For the dalit masses Ambedkar is everything together; a scholar par excellence in the realm of scholarship, a Moses or messiah who led his people out of bondage and ignominy on to the path of pride, and a bodhisattva in the pantheon of Buddhism. He is always bedecked with superlatives, quite like God, whatever may be the context in dalit circles. It is not difficult to see the reason behind the obeisance and

¹Dhanajaya Keer, *Dr Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1990: 423.

²*Ibid.*: 481-482.

³O.M. Lynch, *The Politics of Untouchability: Social Mobility and Social Change in a City of India*, New Delhi: National Publishing House, 1974: 164.

reverence that dalits have for Ambedkar. They see him as one who devoted every moment of his life thinking about and struggling for their emancipation, who took the might of the establishment head on in defence of their cause; who sacrificed all the comforts and conveniences of life that were quite within his reach to be on their side; who conclusively disproved the theory of caste based superiority by rising to be the tallest amongst the tall despite enormous odds, and finally as one who held forth the torch to illuminate the path of their future. Few in the history of millenniums of their suffering had so much as looked at them as humans and empathised with them as fellow beings. He was their own among these few. It was he, who forsook his high pedestal, climbed down to their level, gave them a helping hand and raised them to human stature. It is a commonplace occurrence to see dalits right from the humble landless labourer in villages to the highly placed bureaucrat in corridors of power, emotionally attributing their all to him. They all believe that but for him, they would still be living like their forefathers, with spittoons around their necks and broom sticks to their behind.

It was his icon as the demi-god of dalits that was used up by the competing commanders of his followers to do whatever they liked. This deification that he himself severally warned against and abhorred but which paradoxically had started well during his life time (celebration of his *Jayantis*) and grew after his death with an accelerated pace particularly because he himself became an essential icon in the neo-Buddhist rituals after his embracement of Buddhism. The mass *Dharmantar* (change in religion), unprecedented in modern times and considered by many as the culmination of his life mission, released the flood of dalit religiosity that overwhelmed every other thing. It imparted him a quasi-spiritual aura as Bodhisattva. Many enthusiastically added a saraṇa in his name (*Bhīmaṃ saraṇaṃ gachhāmi*) to the original *tisaraṇa* of Buddhism. This electoral commerce paid off handsomely and created its own rationale and motivation for the permanent division of dalit leaders. Through this process, some of the leaders of the wretched, while serving their cause, amassed wealth worth billions of rupees, became industrialists, maintained fleets of cars, without any evidence of the basic source of their prosperity. It is a tribute to the political consciousness of dalits that while they starved and bled themselves over the issue of unity of these leaders, it never occurred to them to ask, even in a whisper, a question about the source of their material well being! Many blatantly indulged in the acts contrary to their profession for amassing wealth- some set up liquor factories and still remained the front rank leaders of the Buddhists, some allied with the rank castist and communalist and still claimed to be ardent Ambedkarites.

Dalits as a social group, are still the poorest of poor. A negligible minority has managed to escape poverty limits and to locate itself on to a continuum ranging up to a reasonable level of prosperity with the help of certain state policies like reservation and political patronage. In social terms however, all dalits, irrespective of their economic standing, still suffer oppression. This social oppression varies from the crudest variety of untouchability, still being practised in rural areas, to the sophisticated forms of discrimination encountered even in the modern sectors of urban life. Although, the statistics indicate that dalits have made significant progress on almost all parameters during the last five decades, the relative distance between them and non-dalits seems to have remained the same or has increased. More than 75 per cent of the dalit workers are still connected with land; 25 per cent being the marginal and small farmers and the balance 50 per cent being landless labourers. The proportion of dalits landless labourers to the total labourers has shown a steady rising trend. In urban areas, they work mainly in the unorganised sector where the exploitation compares well with that of a feudal rural setting. Out of the total dalit population of 138 million, the number of dalits in services falling in the domain of reservations does not exceed 1.3 million including sweepers; less than even a percent.

The greatest thing about Ambedkar is his consistent anti-dogmatic stance. He never accepted any thing in name of authority. He hated humbug of every kind. He always approached problems with a student's sincerity and researcher's intellectual honesty. He gave a vision that even the ideologies are bound by the tenet of impermanence and no body should claim them validity beyond their times. His followers therefore can assume absolute liberty to think through things as per their own experience in

changing times. The underscoring vision in Ambedkar's thought and action is to be found in his yearning for the end of all kinds of exploitation. Whenever and wherever he smelt exploitation, he raised his voice against it. The caste system that subjugated more than one fifth of the population to levels worse than animals' for more than two millennia and which represented institutionalisation of the most heinous inequality by the Hindu religion as ordained by its gods, became the prime target of his life. He attacked it from the standpoint of its victims - the untouchables. He waged many battles; initially targeting the citadels of Brahminism - the custodian of the Hindu religious code, and later politicised the battle, realising the ineffectiveness of the former. He did not let this objective out of sight even for a moment and worked incessantly for its achievement. This Herculean task almost completely overshadows the fact that his struggles extend well beyond the caste struggles and rather encompass all other forms of exploitation.

Although, he considered the magnitude of the problem of emancipation of dalits is such as to warrant his sole attention, he did take cudgels for other oppressed entities like workers, peasants and women. At one occasion in response to the accusation that he did not care for the tribals, he had to squarely admit the fact that he considered the problem at hand big enough to outlast his life and provokedly put that he never claimed to fight for whole humanity. Such instances though disturbing enough could be understood within their specific context. While dealing with the socio-economic deprivation of dalits, he comprehensively exposed certain systemic dimensions that help perpetuate exploitation. For instance, he was well aware of the capitalist and imperialist oppression besides the decadent feudalism within which domain his problem lay.

In relation to British rule, Ambedkar basically makes two points. The first is that he questions the so-called freedom struggle launched under the leadership of Congress as an anti-imperialist struggle. He contended that the Congress basically represented the class of feudal lords and the urban capitalists - the twosome exploiters of Indian masses. Although, it succeeded through the charismatic leadership of Gandhi in galvanising masses in its support, it essentially relied on bargaining with the colonial rulers for securing itself more share of power. It always throttled the mass spontaneity as in the case of 1942-uprisings and actively opposed the genuine anti-imperialist struggles of the revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh. Ambedkar reflects the understanding of true character of the Congress in his own way, when he says that if Congress was fighting a real anti-imperialist war, he would whole heartedly support it. Ambedkar could see through the anti-imperialist masks the real fangs of an exploiter of masses. He thus not only saw no point in siding with this more real exploiter of people than perhaps the colonial rulers, but also did not hesitate to openly oppose it when it came in the way of dalit liberation. He smelt rot in all such struggles that refused to notice existence of inhuman exploitation of some of their own people within their precincts and tended to over-externalise their woes. Here lay his second point when he raised a question of Hindu imperialism perpetrated through its caste system that was certainly seen as more vicious by its victims than the British rule.

Besides the mainstream forms of exploitation even the subaltern forms like women's exploitation, could not escape his agenda. He viewed them as the most oppressed of all. He always involved women in his struggles and tended to give them vanguard positions. For example, about 500 women had marched at the head of the historical procession at Mahad to assert the untouchables' right to drink water from the public tank.

The anti-caste movements before Ambedkar were mainly welfare oriented. Some wanted a higher rank for their own caste in the caste hierarchy and some taking the inferior culture of their caste to be the reason for their suffering, aimed at improving the same. While Ambedkar accepted the lineage/inheritance of this movement and held Phuley in greatest esteem as his one of the three Gurus, he went beyond to declare annihilation of caste to be the object of his movement in the direction of the goal of 'liberty, equality and fraternity'. In the historical context it certainly was a radical step. He rightly diagnosed that the caste system is basically sustained by the peculiar economic constitution of the Indian village of which the land relations were the main features. Towards breaking this link he toyed with an idea of separate

settlement for dalits at one time and at another exhorted them to leave villages for cities. He had clearly understood that castes stood on multiple props, viz., the religio-cultural relations, feudal relations in village setting of which land relations constituted the crux and the socio-political nexus with the State. Annihilation of castes thus needed destruction of all of them. He soon realised the necessity of political power for this multi-pronged attack. Even to bring about the residual change in the belief system either through the cultural or religious route, he stressed the necessity of political power. In this way, for the first time he brought the problem of untouchability and caste out of the confines of culture to the political agenda. Unfortunately, this political agenda got lost into the maze of parliamentary politics that soon became be-all-end-all with dalit leaders. Even during Ambedkar's times the economic aspects of the problem remained largely untouched giving the impression to his followers as though they did not count. In the overall context it can be seen that they could not be as easily dealt with as the religio-cultural and political aspects of the problem. Moreover, it meant direct confrontation with the State for which Ambedkar was certainly not prepared. Alternately, the feudal relations in villages could be destroyed only if the private ownership of land is abolished and co-operativisation of farming is introduced. He thought, this structural change could be effected through the Constitution. It was a folly that he would soon realise when even as the 'chief architect' of the Constitution he failed so much as to bring this point on the agenda of the Constituent Assembly.

Buddhism, in its purer form, puzzled many people with its radical outlook and rational approach. It did not have a place for God, ritual of any kind or for any permanent entity that characterise all other religions. Morality is said to be its basis and surprisingly a pure democratic criterion of 'happiness and welfare of many' (*bahujana hitāya bahujana sukhāya*) as its motto. He exhorted bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs to wander all over the world carrying the Dhamma to people and not to rest at one place. Even by this, he did not mean spread of his creed; it was essentially an expression of the compassion and concern he had for suffering humanity. For, he had repeatedly advised people not to take his word for granted but test it on the touchstone of their experience and intellect before accepting or rejecting it. He never claimed any role in their emancipation asking them to be their own light. Ambedkar's attraction to Buddhism is basically on account of its moral base and absence of irrationality. On this account it has been the subject of admiration and awe of scores of intellectual people. A person like Einstein had opined that it was the only religion suitable for the scientific age.

In the case of Babasaheb Ambedkar, iconisation was inevitable. The combination of factors like his high stature, his devotion to the cause of his people; the historical setting in which he lived, the low level of literacy and political consciousness in masses; and the vested interests of internal as well as external people have been its cause.

Ambedkar saw the caste system as a serious obstacle in the path of democracy. According to him, democracy lies not in the form of government but in terms of association between the people who form that society. Because Indian society is divided and graded on the basis of the caste system, it is not democratic.⁴ He was a mahar, the largest untouchable caste in Maharashtra. His actions, then, according to Zelliott, "were moulded not only by his own personal background, and achievements, and the Maharashtrian thinking of his day, but also by his status as an untouchable."⁵ This group he came from had begun social and political movements before he assumed a position of leadership.⁶ Behind this

⁴ See, B.R. Ambedkar, "States and Minorities" in W S, vol 1, Bombay: Education Department, 1989.

⁵Eleanor Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*, Delhi: Manohar, 1996: 160.

⁶The mahar group maintained streets, walls, and cremation grounds, and removed dead cattle in the village. The establishment of British rule in Bombay presidency gave the mahars an opportunity for service in the army, employment in cotton mills, ammunition factories, railroads, dockyards, and as servants in British homes. Two instances initiated them to organise. The first was the agitation for continuing the recruitment of mahars into the army

identification with a non-brahmana group lay the logic of a movement that was essentially anti-caste and not simply a movement for 'untouchability removal' or 'self-reform.'⁷ This is not to say that the Mahar movement in the later 19th century was an isolated movement but only to suggest that all these influences constantly streaming in are employed by Ambedkar in a new sense and directed towards a new solution.⁸ The impact of Buddhism on the mahars of Maharashtra state in India has worked as a catalyst and has affected positively other sections of dalits living in different parts of India. As pointed out by one scholar "The conversion thus has created a new set of symbols and myths and produced a new consciousness within the mahar-Buddhist community. It has instilled a sense of pride and self-affirmation among the former mahars. They felt released from the tyranny of caste-Hindus. They have acquired the *manuski* (humanity, self-worth), denied to them as untouchables. This newfound sense of equality and dignity has had repercussions particularly in the villages."⁹

Similarly, Wilkinson has pointed out that "Change of religion has liberated them (mahars) from the stigma of untouchability, thus enhancing their self-confidence to a great measure. Many of them explained that the economic benefit after conversion was mainly due to their giving up the rituals and ceremonies for which a considerable amount was spent. Not being burdened with all these conventional expenses, they could use the money thus saved for bettering their economic condition."¹⁰ So much so, some modern scholars have described the Nagpur conversion of 14 October 1956 as the new *Dhammacakkapavattana* (Turning of the Wheel of Dharma).¹¹

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and lower grades of government service. A second reason was the organisation of mahar caste associations under the name of Somvanshya, a sub-caste of mahars which took up limited issues of internal reform and education. For details about mahars see Zelliott, *ibid*: 156; Jayashree Gokhale, *From Concessions to Confrontation: The Politics of an Indian Untouchable Community*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1990: 218-28.

⁷For instance, important efforts were made by Vitthal Ramji Shinde, member of the Prarthana Samaj, who opposed the non-brahmin party and attempted to draw the mahar community into the Congress movement. The Depressed Classes Mission set up by him around this period focused on education and a reformed Hinduism. See Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, Delhi: Sage, 1994: 143.

⁸Some clues regarding the anti-Congress stance of Maratha leaders are provided by Rosalind O'Hanlon in 'Acts of Appropriation: Non-Brahmin Radicals and the Congress in Early 20th Century Maharashtra' in Mike Shepperdson and Cummins (eds), *The Indian National Congress and the Political Economy of India, 1885-1995*, U K: Avebury: 102-46.

⁹Jayashree Gokhale, *From Concessions to Confrontation: The Politics of an Indian Untouchable Community*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1990: 187.

¹⁰T.S. Wilkinson, "Buddhism and Social Change among Mahars," in T.S. Wilkinson and M.M. Thomas (eds), *Ambedkar and the Neo-Buddhist Movement*, Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1972: 98.

¹¹J.R. Macy and E. Zelliott, "Tradition and Innovation in Contemporary Indian Buddhism," in A.K. Narain (ed), *Studies in Buddhism*, Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1980: 134.

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