

## **Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism**

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Buddhism, the fourth largest world religion has become a subject of study in recent era. This paper shall examine the role of Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar in the renaissance of Buddhism in India and how it have served as a means for the emancipation of the deprived class from oppression at the hands of the upper class Hindus. Buddhism being a rational religion have thrown open the doors for all sentient beings irrespective of one's caste, creed, gender and so on. The Buddha stated -"One does not become a Brahmin by birth. One does not become an outcast by birth. One becomes a Brahmin by one's actions. One becomes an outcast by one's action."(Suttanipata, pp. 641) Ambedkar after his research in Buddhism became a devotee of the Buddha as he was impressed by His teachings based on the right to live and equality among human beings and was in opposition of an unjust, caste-based superstitious Indian society. The Buddha's teaching termed as 'Dhamma' is not merely a composition of rituals, prayers, rules and regulation but a way of life. He paved the middle path for the sentient beings which is known as the Noble Eightfold Path. It is called the middle path because one avoids the two extremes that is one neither follows the path of self-mortification nor that of self-indulgence.

Thus, after enduring the atrocities committed by the caste Hindus towards him since childhood, Ambedkar renounced Hinduism and converted into Buddhism which for him was the ultimate means to put an end to the caste system in Indian society. He aspired for morality and humanity where all human beings have the right to live in dignity and to be free. He delivered a fruitful; message to all of us that we should treat any person as a human being and shall keep alive the humanity within us by becoming the Buddha (the Awakened) by being virtuous and putting into action what the Buddha has preached to us. By following the philosophy of Buddha based on ethics, rationality, reasoning one can indeed become truly enlightened.

The Eightfold path preached by the Buddha encourages one to conduct good deeds and restrain oneself from abominable deeds and helps to accomplish the goal of Nirvana. The attainment of enlightenment that is to become awakened is possible by following the Buddha's teaching in letter and spirit. The Right view is to restrain from superstitions, animal sacrifices, rites and in the inequality of human beings and in the existence of God and

emphasis on self-reliance and on one's own powers of pure reasoning. Thus, the ethical aspects of Buddhism which propagates the way to cultivate sound conscience does itself portrays to be immensely rational in nature. In consistent, Right determination is based on the Right view and states that if one believes in racial, social or communal discrimination, one's determination is harmful to the world. The tenets of Buddhism were studied by the chief architect of India's Constitution, Dr B.R. Ambedkar. After studying and publishing books on the tenets of Buddhism he declared to devote himself in the propagation of Buddhism in India. He defended 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. He founded the Bharatiya Bauddha Mahasabha or Indian Buddhist Society and embraced Buddhism.

Ambedkar, born in an Untouchable family realized that emancipation for the Untouchables is not possible within the Hindu pantheon and therefore, took the decision to change their religion. On 14<sup>th</sup> October, 1956 he himself along with some 365,000 of his followers converted to Buddhism in Nagpur followed by a traditional ceremony. This conversion was in order to escape the caste-based oppression and exploitation in society. Babasaheb Ambedkar saw Buddhism as a means to end the Indian caste system and emancipate the Untouchables placed in the lower rungs of the hierarchical Indian society. In this regard the question arises why Babasaheb Ambedkar converted into Buddhism as well as what Buddhism taught him and meant for him? What role did play in the renaissance of Buddhism and how Buddhism ameliorated the deprived caste in contemporary India? shall be discussed here.

For Ambedkar the factors that would contribute to the emancipation of the deprived classes are conversion to Buddhism, education and it became increasingly apparent that in 1950 he paid reverence to the Buddha at the expense of Krishna, Christ, and Muhammad. He went Ceylon and attended a meeting of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Kandy where he requested the Untouchables of Ceylon to accept Buddhism. In 1951 he secured the Buddha against the accusation that he had caused the downfall of the Indian woman by compiling the Bauddha Upasana Patha, a small collection of Buddhist devotional texts.

He visited Burma in 1954 for the second time to attend the third conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhist in Rangoon. He established the Bharatiya Bauddha Mahasabha or Indian Buddhist Society in 1955 and installed an image of the Buddha in a temple at Dehu Road in Poona. In the presence of thousands of Untouchables who had assembled for the occasion, he declared that he would devote himself to the propagation of Buddhism in India. He also announced that he was writing a book titled “Buddha and His Dhamma” explaining the tenets of Buddhism in simple language for the benefit of the common man and after the compilation of his book he would embrace Buddhism which he completed in February 1956. In that very year, on 14 October 1956 he took the Three Refuges and Five Precepts from a Buddhist monk in the traditional manner followed by the 380,000 men, women, and children in Nagpur. Thus, Ambedkar had revived the lost glory of the Buddhism by setting in motion the Wheel of the Dharma in India. *After sometime he travelled to Kathmandu in Nepal for the fourth conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists and addressed the delegates on ‘The Buddha and Karl Marx’. On his way back to Delhi he made two speeches in Benares and visited Kusinara, where the Buddha had died. In Delhi he took part in various Buddhist functions, attended the Rajya Sabha, and completed the last chapter of his book The Buddha and Karl Marx. On the evening of 5 December he asked for the Preface and Introduction to The Buddha and His Dhamma to be brought to his bedside, so that he could work on them during the night, and the following morning he was found dead. It was 6 December, he was 64 years and 7 months old, and he had been a Buddhist for only seven weeks.* (Ambedkar and Buddhism, 1996, pp. 12)

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, being a Buddhist for seven weeks had made a significant contribution to Buddhism by promoting and propagating Buddhism as Ashoka had done during his time. He caused mass conversion of the Untouchables into Buddhism during and after his death. The 1961 census revealed that the number of Buddhists in India had risen by 1,671 per cent that numbered 3,250,227 and a large majority around more than three quarters of whom lived in Maharashtra. Thus, the successful endeavour of Ambedkar who was the chief Architect of the Constitution of India is today most widely remembered. “It was he who established a revived Indian Buddhism on a firm foundation. It is therefore as the Modern Ashoka that he really deserves to be known, and the statue standing outside the parliament building in Delhi should really depict him holding ‘The Buddha and His Dhamma underneath his arm and pointing – not for the benefit of the Untouchables only, but for the benefit of all mankind – in the direction of the Three Jewels.’ Ambedkar, thus, discovered his spiritual roots in Buddhism and explored his thoughts on the Buddha and the future of his religion,

and made possible the historic occasion on which he and 380,000 Untouchables were spiritually reborn.

Becoming a Buddhist meant going for Refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma and to Sangha and to observe the Five Precepts and what they actually meant. According to Ambedkar, the Buddha was a human being and not an incarnation of Vishnu. He laid emphasis on the attainment of the Enlightenment by one's own effort by following the teaching of the Buddha that comprised of Morality, Meditation, and Wisdom, along with the Noble Eightfold Path. The Sangha comprised of the Buddha's disciples and the Sangha instructed and guided the disciples. In consistence the Five Precepts included abstention from harming living beings, from stealing, from sexual misconduct, from false speech, and from indulgence in intoxicating drinks and drugs. "In Buddhism there was no place for the caste system, or for Untouchability – which for orthodox Hindus were an integral part of their 'dharma' or religious duty."

Initially, the caste system was merely a division of labour but later on caste became an ascribed status in India. The Untouchables, the lowest rung within the caste system suffered severely as they were denied from using public drinking places, commensality, walking on public roads as their shadow defiled the purity of other caste Hindus, learning Sanskrit and were confined to menial task. They have felt as if they have been delivered from hell and thus, conversion to Buddhism, according to Ambedkar was the ultimate weapon to annihilate the caste system.

The question regarding why Ambedkar had chosen Buddhism was due to the very different attitude assumed by the Buddha in comparison to Jesus, Krishna and Muhammad Prophet, as the Buddha never arrogated to himself any such status as they did. In striking contrast to all three of them, 'He was born a son of man and was content to remain a common man and preached his gospel as a common man. He never claimed any divine origin or having supernatural powers nor did he perform miracles to prove his supernatural powers.'(The Untouchables (ed.), p.204) According to Ambedkar, any sentient being can attain Buddhahood via spiritual development that the Buddha attained, and it is for this reason the Ambedkar speaks of the Buddha as a common man where modesty of the Buddha is reflexive.

For Ambedkar the Buddha 'never claimed any supernatural origin or supernatural powers nor did he perform miracles to prove his supernatural powers' and declared that His teachings are reasonable, and that it was possible for a sincere and open-minded person to experience the truth of it for himself, in this very existence and therefore, the Buddha 'preached his gospel as a common man' and more interesting the Buddha did not impose orders on anyone as he or she is free to accept or deny His teachings. *According to tradition the Buddha's First Sermon, delivered to the five Parivrajakas in the Deer Park at Sarnath, near Benares, comprised of the Middle Way, the Four Noble Truths, and the Noble Eightfold Path. Ambedkar regards this as quite inadequate. Indeed, besides being doubtful whether the Four Noble Truths formed part of the original teaching of the Buddha he is of the opinion that they are 'a great stumbling block in the way of non-Buddhists accepting the gospel of Buddhism'. In describing the events leading up to the conversion of the five Parivrajakas he therefore represents the Buddha as speaking of the Dharma he had discovered not just in terms of the Middle Way and in terms of what is, in effect, a 'revised version' of the Four Noble Truths, but also in terms of the Path of Purity, the Path of Righteousness, and the Path of Virtue, which he seems to regard as three successive stages of spiritual development. The Path of Purity consists in recognizing the Five Precepts as principles of life, the Path of Righteousness in following the Noble Eightfold Path, and the Path of Virtue in observing the ten Paramitas or 'States of Perfection' (as he calls them), these last being enumerated according to the Theravada tradition and the preaching of the (revised and enlarged) First Sermon having led the five Parivrajakas to realize that 'this was really a new Dhamma' (Ambedkar and Buddhism, 1996, pp. 112)*

The Buddha preached his doctrine to people belonging both to high and low orders and he did not observe any distinction as to caste or sex in admitting persons to his order. For instance, Angulimala who was a criminal, his aunt come step mother Mahaprajapati Gautami, his wife Yashodhara and lower rung people like Upali the barber, Sunita the sweeper, Sopaka and Supiya the Untouchables, Sumangala the peasant, as well as the high and holy like Yasha, Sariputta and Moggallana, king Bimbisara, Anathapindika, Jivaka and so on, all became his disciples. This is one of the reasons why Ambedkar and his followers decided to embrace Buddhism. And this is how he imbibed Buddhism in his lifetime and instructed to his fellowmen to understand and follow the true nature of Buddhism.

In short, Ambedkar renounced Hinduism and embraced Buddhism which for him was the ultimate means to put an end to the atrocities caused by the caste system in Indian society. He aspired for morality and humanity where all human beings have the right to live in dignity

and to be free. He delivered a fruitful; message to all of us that we should treat any person as a human being and shall keep alive the humanity within us by becoming the Buddha (the Awakened) by being virtuous and putting into action what the Buddha has preached to us.

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