

*Relevance of Thoughts of
Dr. Ambedkar In The Present Times*

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*Dr. Ambedkar's Views on
Humanism and Buddhism*

—Desh Raj Sirswal*

“One should always cherish some ambition to do something in the world. They alone rise who strive.”¹ There are two fundamental types of human nature. Creative and possessive. Creative humans use human intellect for creative endeavors which enriches human thought; knowledge and wealth thereby contribute to the development of human heritage for the posterity. Possessive people, on the other hand do not believe in the use of human intellect for creative purpose. Gautam Buddha, Jesus Christ, Guru Nanak Kabeer, Ravidas, Tukarama, Krantiba Jotirao Phoolay, Periyar and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar they all belong to the great class of Creative humans called as Humanists in the Indian context.

Dr. Ambedkar's mind was deeply imbued with Kabeer's philosophy in the childhood days. On passing his matriculation examination, he was felicitated by his teacher and was presented with a copy of a book on the life of Buddha. This gift must have made a profound impact on the mind of young

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Ambedkar. Apart from his father, three names or figures- Gautama Buddha, Jotibha Phule, and Kabir-are the most important. They were regarded by Ambedkar as his three masters or gurus.² He said, "My social philosophy may be said to be enshrined in three words: Liberty, equality, and fraternity. Let no one, however, say that I have borrowed my philosophy from the French Revolution. I have not. ...I have derived them from the teachings of my master, the Buddha."

Dr. Ambedkar stayed in America, the land of liberty, for his higher studies. There he studied the western liberal thought and the humanitarian philosophy expounded by great thinkers such as Prof. John Dewey, who was also his teacher, John Stuart Mill, Edmund Burke, and Prof. Harold Laski to name a few. The impact of this original thinker on Dr. Ambedkar's mind is evident from the frequent quotations one comes across in his writings and speeches. Whereas the West gave Ambedkar his weapon, the Indian masters gave him his soul force. According to Sonawane, "Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's personality had strong humanistic underpinnings. It is only regrettable that the press in the past as well as the contemporary has projected Ambedkar mainly as a great social rebel and a bitter critic of the Hindu religion. Critics of Dr. Ambedkar have ignored his basic humanistic instincts and strong humanitarian convictions behind his every act or speech throughout his life. It is important to trace the origin and consolidation of his humanistic convictions."⁴

Dr. Ambedkar fought a relentless battle against social order and was one of the very few Indian leaders who was forthright, and called a spade, "I hate all injustice, tyranny, pompousness and humbug." Dr. Ambedkar believed that if he succeeded in his struggle-struggle for a just social order - it will prove a blessing for all Indians, not merely any group or community. He wanted the dominating section of our people

to adopt a strong position against the hierarchical social order. Regrettably, not many have taken a position. "My ideal would be a society based on Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. An ideal society should be mobile, should be full of channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to other parts. In an ideal society there should be many interests consciously communicated and shared. There should be varied and free points of contact with other modes of association. In other words, there must be social endomosis."⁵

Karl Marx has scientifically analyzed this conflict by applying the principles of dialectical materialism to the sphere of social phenomenon and described it as the historical materialism. Slavery, apartheid, gender bias and caste system are the abominable creations of possessive people for the exploitation of creative people. These are man made evils created by man for the exploitation of man. Those, who have raised their voices against these evils and given a relentless fight against the prevailing social order of their times in order to free the creative peoples from the shackles imposed on them have become immortal personalities in the human history.⁶ Dr. Ambedkar gave the central slogan of his life: "Educate, Agitate and Organise". This electrifying message truly captures the spirit of the Marxian concept of praxis, of "action, reflection, action". In the Indian context, education assumes a crucial role because the vast majority of untouchable masses are illiterate. Further, it is not just literacy that he calls for, but education; and not education alone, but agitation and organization too.⁷

Dr. Ambedkar's quest for social justice can be visualized in the philosophy, policy and ideals of the constitution of India. The substance of justice, liberty, equality and benefiting human dignity of individual are made more elaborate in Part III and IV of the constitution. A fleeting glance at the constitution as

a whole reveals the quest of Dr. Ambedkar for social revolution for the reconstruction of an egalitarian and classless society. The fundamental rights as a whole foster the social reconstruction by generating equality, prohibiting discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth, abolishing untouchability and making its practice in any form is an offence punishable by law, and banning trafficking in human beings and forced labour, which furnished a solid basis for social inequalities and injustices.⁸

The Government of Bombay constituted a committee in 1928 to enquire into the educational, economic and social conditions of the depressed classes to recommend measures for their uplift. Dr. Ambedkar was a prominent member of the committee. There are some points which reflect his views about education:

1. Give up the idea that parents give 'janma' to the child and not destiny (*karma*). They can mould the destiny of their children by giving them education.
2. Knowledge is the foundation of man's life.
3. Education is as necessary for females as it is for males.
4. If one's education is detrimental to the welfare of the poor, the educated man is a curse to the society.
5. Character is more important than education.⁹

Dr. Ambedkar's philosophy of education, aims at creation of a liberating consciousness, which is not just formal education, but the conscientisation process of education, agitation and organization, put together. However, there is much confusion about the order of the slogan "Education, Agitation and Organise". "Apparently, the confusion has arisen due to the imperfection in translation. When agitation is translated as "*sanghrash*", the question arises as to how *sangharsh* is possible without 'organisation', and thus 'organise' is sought to be put before 'agitate'. But the word

'agitate' not only means 'sangharsh', but also the agitation of the mind and then awareness, which should precede organization. But 'organise' is also something mistook for 'unite'. These words have different connotations. Organisation is based on a 'consciousness of kind', but unity is possible with a 'consciousness' of a different kind' for a limited objective. Further, when Babasaheb give a call 'agitate', it should be seen in the light of his formulation of the 'pathetic contentment' of the Indian mind and the need to have a 'divine discontentment'. So there should not be any confusion. The central slogan, then, is very clear-"Educate, Agitate and Organise".¹⁰

Dr. Ambedkar was a revolutionary, rationalist-humanist, human rights intellectual-activist, a man who looked ahead of his time. The Hindu community is set in the steel frame of the caste system, in which one caste is lower than another in social gradation involving particular privileges, rights, inhibition and disabilities with regard to each caste. This system has created vested interests, which depend upon maintaining the inequalities resulting from the system. He, therefore, "unfurled the banner of equality".¹¹ He was born in an "untouchable" family 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. What were his reasons for doing so? A detailed answer to this question can be obtained by studying his *The Buddha and His Dhamma, Annihilation of Caste, Philosophy of Hinduism, Riddles in Hinduism* etc. Nonetheless, some of his articles, speeches and interviews before and after his conversion to Buddhism throw some light on this question. According to Ambedkar, "what is called religion by Hindus is nothing but a multitude of commands and prohibitions."¹² He has enumerated the evils of Hinduism in the following manner:

1. It has deprived moral life of freedom.

2. It has only emphasized conformity to commands.
3. The laws are unjust because they are not the same for one class as of another. Besides, the code is treated as final.

Dr. Ambedkar embraced Buddhism because the Buddhist dharma is based on scientific reasoning, it seeks to achieve human freedom, equality, liberty and fraternity. According to him Buddha taught, "social freedom, intellectual freedom, and political freedom. He taught equality, equality not between man and man only but between man and woman. His concern was to give salvation to man in his life on earth, and not to promise it to him in heaven after he is dead."¹³

After a comparative study of different religions, he concluded that Buddhism was the best religion from this point of view. In his article "Buddha and the Future of his Religion" published in 1950 in the Mahabodhi Society Journal, Ambedkar has summarized his views on religion and on Buddhism in the following manner:

1. The society must have either the sanction of law or the sanction of morality to hold it together. Without either, the society is sure to go to pieces.
2. Religion, if it is to survive, it must be in consonance with reason, which is another name for science.
3. It is not enough for religion to consist of moral code, but its moral code must recognize the fundamental tenets of liberty, equality and fraternity.
4. Religion must not sanctify or make a virtue out of poverty.¹⁴

Lokamitra expressed Dr. Ambedkar's vision and its influence upon him in these lines, "I visited India in 1977 and met Sangharakshita's Ambedkarite disciples. I caught a glimpse of Dr Ambedkar's great vision of a society in which everyone was free to develop themselves to the fullest, and

all related to each other on the basis of equality and friendship, not by political means but through Buddhist practice. Devoting his life to the eradication of untouchability, he had, after a long and arduous journey, realized that effective social change will only come about through change within the individuals, deep attitudinal and ethical changes. I wanted to be part of it, and encouraged by my teacher, Sangharakshita and his Indian disciples, decided to live in India."¹⁵

Again he said how Ambedkar's thinking works, "I have traveled extensively, especially amongst followers of Dr. Ambedkar and Dalits. I have found invariably that those who are following a spiritual practice through Buddhism avoid the two common extreme reactions to caste discrimination and violence. Not only are they less likely to be inflamed, but also they are also unlikely to go to the other extreme of being cowed and intimidated. They are able to take a more individual and creative approach to their centuries-old oppression."¹⁶

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 British Broadcasting Corporation, London. In his talk Ambedkar said: "I prefer Buddhism because it gives three principles in combination, which no other religion does. Buddhism teaches Prajna (understanding as against superstition and supernaturalism), Karuna (love), and Samata (equality). This is what man wants for a good and happy life. Neither God nor soul can save society."¹⁷

Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism differs from the traditional interpretation on this point. "From a rationalist and humanist point of view, one may say that Buddhism is a better religion than Hinduism and that it is closer to rationalism-humanism as compared to any other religion. Still, it cannot

be denied that Buddhism is a religion and certain elements like faith, worship and other-worldliness or supernaturalism, which are common to all religions, are also found in Buddhism. Therefore the best thing is to give up all religions and adopt rational humanism as a philosophy of life.”¹⁸ According to Ambedkar, Buddhism fulfilled these requirements and so among the existing religions it was the only suitable religion for the world. He felt that the propagation of Buddhism needed a Bible. Apparently, Ambedkar wrote *The Buddha and his Dhamma* to fulfill this need.

Dr. Ambedkar will be remembered for all time to come as the architect of the Indian Constitution, specially for the Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles Chapters which, aim at eradicating “all injustice and tyranny” and ushering in social democracy and social equality. He was however, disappointed that the dominating section of our society did not rise to the occasion and did not water the plants, he had planted. Our political rulers have failed Ambedkar and his vision. It is now for human rights groups and grassroots activists to make social democracy and equality a way of life in the absence of which political democracy will always stand on a shaky foundation.¹⁹ “To translate into action the cherished dream of Dr. Ambedkar in an honest manner requires strong commitment, honest approach and effective implementation of the constitutional mandates upholding the ethos of secularism and eschewing ulterior considerations, narrow party politics, deep-rooted prejudices based on historical events and the so-called religious bigotry.”²⁰ As Ambedkar himself says: “Man are mortal, so are ideas. Ideas need propagation as much as a plant needs watering. Both will otherwise wither and die.”²¹

Dr. Ambedkar also laid down distinction between Dhamma

and Religion. He says, “Religion, it is said, is personal and one must keep it to oneself. One must not let it play its part in public life. Contrary to this, Dhamma is social. It is fundamentally and essentially so.”²² So, for him it is a system. But in reality when we give an analysis of Buddhist countries then we find that it has failed to establish equality, freedom, peace and socialism in China and Japan etc. being as a national religious system. They are suffering from the same problems as another countries do. It is another sound matter for consideration. In the West most people come to Buddhism for psychological reasons. In India it is different. Dr. Ambedkar’s followers were moved by his vision of a new society brought about by the practice of Buddha Dhamma. However, he died just six weeks or so after the great conversion in October 1956, which had sadly been ignored by the Buddhist world. In the words of T.K. Tope: “Dr. Ambedkar’s erudition and learning were no doubt great... The generations to come may not remember the political achievements of Dr. Ambedkar, Ambedkar the social revolutionary, Ambedkar the modern exponent of Buddhism, may be forgotten, but Ambedkar the scholar, will be immortal.”²³

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