

Reinterpreting Buddhism: Ambedkar on the Politics of Social Action

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B R Ambedkar's reinterpretation of Buddhism gives us an account of action that is based on democratic politics of contest and resistance. It relies on a reading of the self as a multiple creature that exceeds the constructions of liberal autonomy. Insofar as Buddhist groups do not jeopardise or restrict their members' capacities and opportunities to make any decision about their own lives, they do not risk violating democratic principles. But to remain socially relevant they must continue to contribute to a practical impact on the social world which is so neatly intertwined with the political in present-day India.

Buddhism is one of those religious doctrines that has persisted for about 2,500 years and during this period has undergone profound radical changes.¹ The last century has seen a revitalisation and expansion of Buddhism throughout south and south-east Asia. Its major tenets have been modernised and reformulated by many political leaders, especially B R Ambedkar (1891-1956). While his attempt was to give an ethical foundation to the dalit movement Buddhism emerged from this transformation imbued with nationalist associations and political aspirations that anchored it in many civil movements in India. The *Buddha and His Dhamma* (henceforth *BD*) as well as Ambedkar's numerous articles and books have captivated an entire generation of academia, social activists and policymakers. In 1935 despairing of Hinduism's inability to abolish the caste system and remove the stigma of untouchability, Ambedkar declared his intention to convert to a religion that did not endorse caste hierarchy but would provide the framework of a society based upon principles of non-discrimination, equality and respect. In recent years Ambedkar's reputation has been growing again, as some of his ideas seem not only to have survived the passage of time but to have taken on a new relevance. One example is his account of the way in which there is a need to give a new doctrinal basis to religion that according to him "will be in consonance with liberty, equality and fraternity, in short, with democracy" (1989b: 77). This meant a "complete change in the values of life...But a new life cannot enter a body that is dead. New life can enter only in a new body" (1989b: 78).

He assured the people at Yeola in 1935, that though he was born Hindu, he will not die a Hindu. Over the years he considered Christianity, Islam and Sikhism in his search for a new religion, but from relatively early on his choice was Buddhism. There was little understanding of it as a living religion as it had been virtually extinct in India for centuries, yet Buddhism was a traditional Indian faith, based upon suppositions familiar to most people. More significantly it was a religion "that could be conceived as rational, ethical and unburdened by sacerdotal hierarchy" (Dirks 2001: 271).

On 14 October 1956, Ambedkar publicly adopted Buddhism at a *deeksha* (conversion) ceremony held in Nagpur (Lynch 1969). On that day and the next he led the conversion of a large number of followers most of them from the group of Mahars who had come only for that purpose.² A Buddhist scholar who was part of the mass conversion movement wrote that "after years of unsuccessful struggle for the basic human rights of his people, he was forced to recognise that there was going to be no change of heart on the part of caste Hindus: if the dalits wanted to rid themselves

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of their “age-old disabilities they had no alternative but to renounce the religion into which they had been born” (Sangharakshita 2006: 59).

The mass conversion of dalits brought about a new emphasis on the secular ethics of Buddhism that took the campaign against brahmanism to a wider Indian stage in two ways. First it led to a renewed interest in Buddhism as a way of life and a set of doctrines which were different from prevailing ritualised ordinances of many religions. The choice for Buddhism in this reinterpretation was based on “reason” and not “revelation” (Fuchs 2004: 253). Indian political thought believed that ultimately the values guiding our behaviour must have some basis independent of and outside human desires. Buddhism differed from most other Indian schools of thought insofar as it did not assume the “existence of an eternal material or spiritual primary substance out of which the manifold world evolved” (Klostermaier 2006: 32). At the same time questioning the spiritual and metaphysical elements of Buddhism Ambedkar also “shunned the esoteric otherworldliness of religions, as well as their orthodoxies, doctrines and dogmas” (Tejani 2007: 63). His investigations led him to believe that Buddhism offers an ethical ideal of living honestly according to principles that require no sustenance from the wider cosmos; it undermined the idea of divinity as it never claimed any status for a prophet; the focus was on the “agency of the individual” (Fuchs 2004: 253-54). It was this character of “worldly rationality”, “the emphasis on the will and judgment of the individual” that Ambedkar believed could provide the basis for a renewed moral code in society (Tejani 2007: 63).

Unlike other religious doctrines, a key concept of Buddhist doctrine is that of impermanence or becoming which means that “everything, be it a person, a thing, or a god, is...merely a putting together of component elements” (Love 1965: 56-57). Further, in each individual without exception the relation of its component parts is eternally changing and is never the same for even two consecutive moments. The Buddha explains that an insight into the composite world deprives everything of its “substantial individuality”. Applied to human existence it implies that a human being is a composite of *skandhas* (aggregates) namely: *rupa* (body), *vedana* (feeling), *samjna* (perception), *samskara* (motive forces), and *vijana* (consciousness). But none of these transient aggregates is identical with the self or constitutes an immortal substance called the “soul” (Klostermaier 2006: 32).

By admitting members of lower castes and women into the sangha (association) the Buddha took steps to destroy social inequalities. Instead of protecting the interests of certain social groups, “dhamma” thus becomes a “universal morality which protects the weak from the strong, which provides common models, standards, and rules, and which safeguards the growth of the individual” (Sangharakshita 2006: 157). These two changes led to what is called “sacralisation of the social sciences” by some scholars to describe contemporary developments, in which a mode of thinking attempts to rediscover or restore religious experience and spirituality to its rightful place in knowledge-seeking activities (Alatas 2006: 95). It also gave rise to an alternative discourse that refers to systematic exposition of non-western thought with special reference to a new set of concept clusters.

Towards a Dalit Neo-Buddhist Political Thought

Many scholars argue that developing a theoretical framework for Buddhism’s engagement with social issues, social justice and rights is not in the nature of Buddhism: it is an ontological discourse that aims at individual salvation through inner transformation (Cho 2002). Others are reluctant to identify any notion of human rights as “both human and non-human beings are equally subject to transiency or impermanency” (Abe 1986: 202). Damien Keown questions whether the idea of human rights can find a “philosophical justification within the overall Buddhist vision of individual and social good” (Keown 1998: 24). Thus because of its emphasis on individual salvation through detachment, Buddhism is often seen as a religion that fails to consider societal problems. How does a Buddhist really alleviate suffering? Buddhist thought rarely, if ever, addresses the topic of social justice in the modern sense, that is, in terms of such things as human rights, the fair distribution of resources, the impartial rule of law, and political freedom.

Given these arguments Ambedkar’s interpretation of Buddhism raises many questions: Can *dukkha* (sorrow) as institutionalised social oppression be counted as basis for a theory of social justice? Is it concerned with the phenomena of power, dominance as well as action-oriented political thinking? I argue that Ambedkar should be situated amongst those Buddhist thinkers who have reframed and reinvented central tenets of Buddhist teaching for their community. His interpretation shows how a theory of social action can be a plausible ground for a Buddhist concept of social justice without endangering the primary focus on individual salvation. This implies, to use Mary Douglas’ term an “active voice sociology” which motivates people making decisions; it emphasises agency and portrays people as active participants in their own lives (Douglas 1979: 51). Unlike an institutional approach that treats people as if they were only products of institutions this approach emphasises people’s influence over the institutions they create. In this way Ambedkar has raised a new set of questions about the role of religion in social life as the individual becomes the main point of reference in the shaping of values, attitudes and beliefs. He thereby effectively particularises politics as a vibrant and unique human activity and thereby develops a critique aimed at freeing the subject from domination and violence of coercive traditions. It is a central feature of Ambedkar’s political vision that for power to be chastened political institutions must redress social inequities in civil society. In championing a conception of politics which embraces diverse activities (apart from electoral politics) he makes politics coextensive with concerns in the social, cultural and economic life and opens these domains to public scrutiny which is not the same as conflating the political and social.³

Broadly “traditional” Buddhism makes a sharp critique of civil society, the caste system and the socio-moral codes (including its views on rights, freedom and justice) on which it is based.⁴ A justification for the rejection of hierarchical social structures is not hard to find in Buddhist literature – one need look only at Buddha’s critique of caste that also holds, in the doctrine of no-self, that all individuals are equal in the most profound sense. The compelling quality of Ambedkar’s conceptions however are

that they have much to do with a radically new articulation of Buddhism which originally was about engagement with the world apart from the practices of truth, compassion and contemplation. But the self understanding of Buddhism remains shackled in older philosophical categories that it thinks it has surmounted and which have traditionally looked down on action.

Compared to the voluminous literature on conversion little attention has been paid to developing concepts in what is broadly dalit neo-buddhist thought that differ substantially from those found in “traditional” Buddhism. The scope of my inquiry is limited to retrieving Ambedkar’s interpretation of what is widely known as dhamma which has received relatively little attention. For now after some preliminary points on conversion, I elaborate the main principles of dhamma and a theory of social action. I then attempt to respond to three challenges to Ambedkar’s interpretation: empirical claims about the limited agenda of Buddhist conversions, difficulties arising out Ambedkar’s approach to culture and the relevance of Buddhism in contemporary global society. I argue that the conceptual strategy that Ambedkar so brilliantly employs in order to counter discrimination and prejudice in Hinduism is a double-edged sword: for even as the assertion that there is a specific Buddhist approach to social ethics and action in dhamma provides us with a valuable analytical device for the production of personhood and subjectivity as a political process, it undercuts the theorising of politics within a liberal theoretical frame. I argue that the stress on freedom to choose one’s religion reworks conceptions of moral personhood and ultimately of self and subjective existence that throws light on the conceptual underpinnings of secular politics in India today.

The Question of Conversion: A Second Look

Before turning to analyse social action in Buddhism I provide some preliminary points regarding the scope of this paper. First it is not possible to address all the perspectives on the notions of social justice and the teachings of Buddhism (Navayana, Hinayana, Lamaism, Mahayana). I shall focus on what I believe to be the most influential and important interpretation of Buddhism in India, namely, dalit neo-Buddhist thought.

Second, it is necessary to give some clarifications about the nature of Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism which seems so eccentric to the academic world of the 1950s, by making a distinction between fundamental principles and derivative principles. Ambedkar’s central claim is that at the fundamental level all people should be guided by principles of equality, liberty and fraternity as found in liberal political theory. To what extent did he justify these principles within liberal theory and to what extent he goes beyond its framework by locating them in a “religion of principles”, which is the basis for civic government is something that needs to be explored (1989b). In this paper, I restrict myself to examining the value of Ambedkar’s interpretation that extends beyond conversion to shed light on contemporary debates that range from global ethics, individual autonomy and social action. For many scholars that one so committed to liberal democratic ideals should ultimately embrace religious conversion as a solution to the oppression of dalits appears paradoxical.

But while it is appropriate to begin with Ambedkar’s reasons for conversion to Buddhism I will only reflect on some points here regarding the motivations since they are pertinent to the arguments elaborated in this paper.⁵ Over the years the existing scholarship on the above events has looked at conversion from very different and sometimes very contradictory ways.

To begin with Ambedkar’s redefinition of Buddhist liberation – as the amelioration of material conditions and social relationships in this life, did not find ready acceptance among Buddhist intellectuals in India. Richard W Taylor (1972: 146) is of the view that Ambedkar’s reading of the Four Truths is “little short of an emasculation of the Buddha’s Dhamma”. For some his interpretation as “a political strategy which involved political mobilisation of dalit masses directed at creating a counter-culture with political underpinnings for the negation of Hindu dominant culture”; others oppose this standpoint to claim that Ambedkar “chose Buddhism for its moral strength and egalitarian principles for a quality social change and not for its use as a political tool” (Narain and Ahir 1994: 94).

I summarise these views as follows. The standard argument is that Ambedkar viewed Hinduism as a “religion of rules” and as his efforts to transform it did not succeed he chose to convert to Buddhism – a religion based on principles of equality. This instrumental approach maintains that conversion was a secondary principle in order to bring about the liberal principles of equality, liberty and fraternity” (Fitzgerald 1999; Lynch 1969). A second view upheld by Zelliot (1998: 220) maintains that conversion reinterprets a historical past; it has given Buddhist communities “a new set of religious ideas, a thought provoking image, a series of occasions around which to rally which have no historic overtones of caste hierarchy”. In addition to the sense of release from being untouchable, “there is a sense of belonging to a great past”. The theory of previous Buddhist identity fits well into the untouchables “need of an honourable past, a cultural heritage that can be claimed with pride”.

A final approach supports the view that conversion furthered some ideals and it was desirable from the point of view of its consequences for the dalit identity as a group. Ambedkar desired a religious identity for dalits since he had an enduring respect for and emotional commitment to a religious and cultural tradition (Gokhale 1993).

In my response I follow the lead given by some scholars who have viewed the Buddhist conversion of 1956 that shook Hindu society by its separatism and radicalism as that which in fact prefigured in early dalit attempts within Hinduism to assert their cultural independence (Constable 1997). There is a shift from a religious to a secular discourse as Ambedkar attempted to bring Buddhism to the “world of social action and social change” (Omvedt 2003: 3; Queen 1996: 65). According to Thurman (1978: 19) Ambedkar’s hermeneutics of Buddhist liberation follows Nagarjuna, Aryadeva and even Fa Tsang who reframed and reinvented Buddha’s central teachings.⁶

These arguments are useful for a positive reading in which Ambedkar gave precedence to transformation in “social” relations by questioning the public-private dichotomy or what is broadly called the distinction between the social and political

sphere in liberalism. Almost all political theorists in the western tradition have accepted some justification for separating religion from the State. Secularisation is seen as part of a process of modernisation embracing protestant reformation, the rise of the modern state, the growth of capitalism and the expansion of the sciences. All these dynamics are seen to cause religion to loosen its dominating influence in political life. However we know that each of these carriers of modernisation develops in different places at different times and the historical processes of secularisation thus vary accordingly. Ambedkar understood the crisis of his time; despite constitutional guarantees, individual belief systems related to caste practices in the social sphere had not changed in India: despite modernisation institutional religion was very much influencing everyday lives. I shall argue that his theory of action is in response to the dehumanising forces of caste practices; he seeks to identify the practical context within which human beings as individuals can actualise freedom as a mode of thought in action and regain a sense of individual salvation. In a context where Hindu and Muslim communalism comprised the meaningful world of political action and discourse, Ambedkar subverts the very relationship between the political and social.

I also suggest that like many “classical republicans” he believed that the voluntary associations which individuals freely form are more meaningful and that the good life consisted of participation in political activities rather than in pursuit of private (polluting or non-polluting) occupations.⁷ In contrast to the republican tradition he however expects the state to perform a more interventionist role in opposing the ascriptive hierarchy of the caste system, to increase the level of security for the oppressed castes and to ensure equality of opportunity to public offices. To pursue this task of redefining these spheres I focus on Ambedkar’s theory of action because it has played an emancipatory role in one of the most dramatic events of our time.

Developing a Theory of Social Action

The goal of Buddhism has been primarily seen as attainment of inner peace through the experience of enlightenment often described as nirvana (liberation). Now many scholars view Buddhism as a way of enlightenment which further means to be “compassionate, tolerant, reasonable, moral and engaged in life” (Brazier 2002: 1).

This was not the view that prevailed when Ambedkar wrote *The Buddha and His Dhamma* which was published posthumously in 1957. In order to make it relevant to modern society Ambedkar had to liberate Buddhism from distortions injected in it by brahmanical ritualism, and to redefine it as humanistic Buddhism. For this he had to retrieve the social message which had been buried by modern authors. To accomplish this task he explores both thematically and in chronological order the political history and theology of early Buddhism and its relevance.

In the introduction to this work Ambedkar explains his philosophical undertaking along with some key concepts. For him the justification of something, the finding of its inherent rationality is not a matter of seeking its origins but rather of studying it conceptually. He argues that “if man is free, then every event must be the result of man’s action or of an act of Nature. There cannot

be any event which is supernatural in its origin” (BD: 250). At the very beginning two characteristics of Buddha’s teachings are emphasised: their rationality and their social message. He is emphatic that the study is scientific in that it deals in a systematic way with something essentially rational. In other words it rests on the preposition that Buddhism is based on reason and experience and thus is in accord with science (Fuchs 2004: 310). He further remarks that this approach signified “liberation of religion from social entanglement” making religion free to address itself to society; to give (individual) guidance and (collective) orientation (Fuchs 2004: 310).

The Buddha, Ambedkar claims rejected four theses on which brahmanic philosophy rested: that the Vedas are infallible and cannot be questioned or challenged; salvation of the soul can be had by rituals and sacrifices; principles of a *chaturvarna* society; and the doctrine of karma (BD: 87-89).

In Book I, part v, Ambedkar traces Buddha’s rational approach to Kapila, an exponent of Sankhya philosophy based on logic and facts. The tenets of his philosophy, the *Sankhya-Darsana* were that “truth must be supported by proof” (BD: 84) for which Kapila allowed two means: perception and inference. He questions the theory that there was a being that created the universe (BD: 84) as “the empirical universe consists of things evolved and things that are not evolved” (BD: 85). It is not surprising that given Kapila’s influence, Buddhism denies the reality of god, understood as creator or as absolute, ultimate entity. Buddha did not even claim a divine or supernatural status for himself. On the contrary Buddhism is the result of “discovery” and “inquiry and investigation into the conditions of human life on earth”. Further it can be questioned or tested and his followers are “free to modify or even to abandon any of his teachings if it was found that at any given time and in given circumstances they did not apply” (Fuchs 2004: 311).

The text examines two main premises that at the centre of dhamma is man and the “relationship of man to man in his life on earth” and that “the purpose of dhamma is to reconstruct the world” (BD: 322). In his search Buddha discovered quite early that “since there was so much unhappiness” in the world, it was wrong “for him to sit as a sanyasi (holy man) with folded arms and allow things to remain as they were” (BD: 112). After attaining enlightenment, he “realised that what is necessary is not to escape from the world. What is necessary is to change the world and make it better” (BD: 112). He realised that he left the world because “there was so much conflict resulting in misery and unhappiness and for which he knew no remedy” (BD: 112).

In Book IV while discussing the relationship between religion and dhamma, Ambedkar elaborates that this path had nothing to do with god and soul. He argues that “what the Buddha calls Dhamma differs fundamentally from what is called religion”. Instead of seeing religion as “personal” which has no role to play in public life, he argues that it is “social”. Further dhamma is “righteousness, which means right relations between man and man in all spheres of life” in which case “society cannot do without dhamma” (Ambedkar B R: 316). He explains that “the centre of religion lay not in the relation of man to god. It lay in the relation between man and man. The purpose of religion is to teach man how he should behave towards other men so that all men

may be happy” (BD: 254). The text later mentions, “all prophets have promised salvation. The Buddha is the one teacher who did not make any such promise. He made a sharp distinction between a moksha data and a marga data, one who gives salvation and one who only shows the way. He was only a marga data. Salvation must be sought by each for himself by his own effort” (BD: 218).

While endorsing Buddha’s teachings Ambedkar is at pains to distinguish his approach by rejecting four positions of Buddhism before reformulating a theory of social action.

First he rejects the traditional version of Siddhattha’s Parivraja (going forth) (Omvedt 2003: 4) arguing that the story of being moved by an old man, a sick man and a dying man were unreasonable; instead he highlights the political exigencies, and the strength of Buddha’s social conscience during a conflict over water rights.

Second in the introduction to *Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar even doubts whether the four Aryan truths (on the existence, origin and overcoming of suffering and the path to be followed) form the original teachings of Buddha because they deny hope to humankind. He claims the four noble truths make “the gospel of the Buddha a gospel of pessimism”. Dukkha, the origin of sorrow, the cessation of suffering and the way leading to the cessation of suffering are caused by the human attachment to the illusions of the world. Ambedkar cautioned that since the victim is blamed for the cause of suffering, the traditional presentation of the “four truths” would be very likely offensive and unacceptable to people who suffered face-to-face subordination or structural oppression. “Suffering” in Ambedkar’s interpretation is in the form of sorrow, misery or poverty that is caused by the “exercise of power by one person or class over another” (Tejani 2007: 63). Queen views these alternations and rejections as ways to create a message of social activism in Buddhism. For these reasons the goal of the eightfold path is “to remove injustice and inhumanity that man does to man” rather than “nirvana” (1996: 48, 56-57).

In the introduction Ambedkar alerts us to a contradiction between the doctrines of *anatta* (the non-existence of the eternal soul), and the doctrines of karma (action) and rebirth.⁸ For Ambedkar Buddha denied the existence of a soul but taught the doctrine of rebirth as the doctrine of past karma “is inconsistent with the Buddhist doctrine of non-soul” (BD: 343). Ambedkar’s interpretation is in contrast to the Hindu belief in a soul that relies upon an individualistic and fatalistic interpretation of karma, “an inhuman and absurd doctrine” (BD: 344). It is hereditary and impressed upon the soul that passes from one life to the next. Unlike brahminical Hinduism, Buddhism rejects caste distinctions and the karma theory of a soul that is reborn and predestined to live out a life determined by its previous action. A person’s value is measured by current actions and not by the caste into which she or he is born. This negates the idea that current social injustices are a result of past misdeeds.

Finally Ambedkar claims that the bhikkhu (those who live on alms) can be the hope of Buddhism only if he is a social servant in a sangha that should be a community devoted to social service. Ambedkar tries to rationalise the existence of the Sangha: a

bhikkhu leaves his home but he does not retire from the world. He leaves home

so that he may have the freedom and opportunity to serve those who are attached to their homes but whose life is full of sorrow, misery and unhappiness and who cannot help themselves.

He goes so far to assert that “a bhikkhu who is indifferent to the woes of mankind, however perfect in self-culture is not at all a bhikkhu” (BD: 435). In this way the dhamma’s origins in social concern, its non-Aryan character and the ambiguous role of the sangha are departures from traditional views that appear integral to the relevance the converts find in it. Thus Ambedkar’s dhamma as a social teaching directed to the dispossessed was wrapped in social injunctions. According to Queen he consistently addresses the physical and spiritual sufferings of historical communities with scant reference to a life to come (Queen 1996). Teltumbde views some of the concepts related to a happy life that is well-lived as close to the Aristotelian concept of “eudaimonia” (2007: 121). It connotes the object for which no other goal is posited as it is pursued for its own sake.

Given the discussion above we can argue that Buddhism was chosen over and above other religions because as a social gospel it gave weight to a theory of social action. Although he stressed Buddha’s attack on caste and the dalit’s historical connection with Buddhism it should be noted that Ambedkar did not however identify the Buddha’s message and movement solely in terms of a revolt against the caste system; as evident in the story of the “going forth”, the social concerns were much wider and involved a larger audience.

If the Buddha’s gospel is seen as essentially social, then so is dukkha, the central Buddhist notion of suffering or sorrow which is the condition of misery and poverty wrought by social and economic injustice. According to Fuchs, the recognition of the existence of suffering is counterbalanced by an “equal stress on the removal of suffering” (2004: 312). Nibbana is not about liberating the soul from the material world as for Ambedkar it is “vain to escape from the world...what is necessary is to change the world and make it better” (Fuchs 2004: 312).

Ambedkar’s ideas about social action and class conflict are illustrated in a speech to the Fourth-World Fellowship of Buddhist conference in Nepal in November 1956 in his famous essay *Buddha or Karl Marx*. Ambedkar rejected a number of Marxist assumptions including the inevitability of socialism and the use of violence to bring about social change but he accepted the core of Marx’s ideas as essential to the goals of the dalit movement. He also refers to a dialogue between Buddha and Ananda when the former discusses avarice and the dangers of possessing private goods. Ahir argues that Ambedkar’s interest in Marxism is evident in his assertion that the term dukkha which is the foundation of Buddha, refers to “exploitation and poverty” (Ambedkar 1990: 184). Thus the fundamental purpose of dhamma is the recognition and removal of suffering through human action. The emphasis on social action and the rejection of belief in the supernatural are the significant elements of Ambedkar’s Buddhism. This mode of ethical life that emerges falls between the mediation of subjectivity and universality which is provided spiritually in the dhamma and politically in the modern state.

Critiques of Ambedkar's Interpretation of Buddhism

Given the drive for equality that motivated Ambedkar to lead his people into Buddhism, it is clear why he interprets the dhamma in social terms. That this social emphasis led to exclude or to distort some teachings, fundamental to traditional and canonical Buddhism is understandable, yet it raises substantial problems. Criticisms of the standpoint expounded earlier come from three general directions. I identify these challenges as follows:

The first challenge relies on empirical grounds that demonstrate Buddhism in India has a limited range. It is also argued that although "traditional Buddhism" valued equal worth of human beings over considerations of caste, rank and wealth, it did not openly militate against the caste system. It seems that as the founder of a monastic order, the Buddha addressed himself mainly to the goal of moksha (liberation). Thus the early Buddhists were emphatic in their assertion of the equality of all in the context of pursuit of the highest spiritual value while, at the same time, not denying social distinctions as the norm of everyday human association.

Ambedkarite Buddhists are treated as a sect mostly viewed as religion of mainly one jati, the Mahars. Although rural Mahars have refused to perform customary activities related to scavenging and have given up the practice of consuming beef after conversion, their recognition and acceptance of subcaste hierarchy and untouchability is evidence that Buddhism has not changed "anything very radically" (Fitzgerald 1997: 20). Neera Burra (1997) in her work notes that traditional Hindu concepts of karma and dharma (awakening) persist along with Buddhism practices and therefore the dalit Buddhist movement is "a symbol of identity transformation" rather than a true religious conversion (p 168).

I shall address the first challenge here in order to spend some time on two other challenges in the last section. I would clarify that the Buddhist movement suffered a major setback with Ambedkar's death so shortly after the conversion. It did not receive immediate support from dalit leaders although there were attempts to resuscitate the core philosophical and social ideas of Buddhism morally in the vernacular idiom. Indeed division over conversion and the nature of the neo-Buddhist movement within dalit groups has been an additional impediment. I do not suggest that these empirical claims are not true. Neither do I wish to undermine the empirical claims as no one can deny that ex-dalits are subjected to atrocities and ostracism by higher castes. It is to protest their place in Hindu society that many dalit groups have converted to other religions. Today neo-Buddhists, a group embracing about 90% of the Indian Buddhists are emerging as an important political force. For the broad sections of the dalit masses that have been confined to lowly occupations, suffering humiliation and low self-esteem the spiritual path has brought about a major social transformation. Many refuse the impure duties of their caste and seek for alternative occupations. They celebrate their own festive days, i e, the birthdays of Buddha and Ambedkar.

The issue that I wish to now raise is the attempt to establish religious influence in order to alleviate social-ills leading to an emphasis on praxis. While conversion under the liberal option offers a possibility for religion to break out of its privatised functional

ghetto and be repositioned onto the political stage, the possibilities are limited in the modern Indian context. In the absence of any additional, non-religious measures, including political involvement neo-Buddhists are left with voluntaristic decision-making and fragmented responses.

Contemporary Debates on Conversion

In the last decade despite these criticisms we find a major growth in numbers of Buddhists in India making them almost 1% of the population in India. According to the 2001 Census there are currently 7.95 million Buddhists out of which 5.83 million reside in Maharashtra. Thousands of people from different castes have converted to Buddhism in public ceremonies the most recent being part of 50th year celebrations of Ambedkar's deeksha. A leading newspaper report estimated that in 2006, 20 lakhs of people congregated at Nagpur, Deekshabhoomi, while another six lakh attended the second biggest ceremony at Chandrapur on 15-16 October.⁹ States that witnessed similar ceremonies were reported as Andhra Pradesh, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh.¹⁰ Earlier, in 2001, a prominent dalit leader and Justice Party chief Udit Raj organised a mass conversion where he gave the 22 vows.¹¹ The All India Confederation of sc/st organisations (AICSCSTO) produced a list of dalits who had converted since there was criticism from the right wing parties for taking this step.

Some debates have arisen from the clause inserted in the Indian Constitution as the Presidential Order of 1950 according to which only the scheduled castes (scs) professing Hinduism were entitled for reservations in public sector employment, federal and state services and educational institutions run or aided by the State. The assumption is that non-Hindu religions are not based on caste hierarchies of Hinduism and therefore their members do not require special protections of any kind. Later in 1956 in response to an appeal of the Sikh community the parliament amended the order to include dalit Sikhs in the scs, and in 1990, Buddhist dalits were added in the list to honour Ambedkar on his birth centenary.

Recent debates on conversion seem to be more concerned with "Hindu dalits" and their relationship with the "dominant Hindu social order" (Wankhede 2009: 35). All this is changing as many groups such as the converted dalit Christians and dalit Muslims have raised their voices for social justice. For years dalits have been removed from the sc category if they convert to Christianity or Islam. The exclusion of dalit Christians and Muslims has caused great concern as it is contrary to the spirit of a constitution that promotes secularism and freedom of religion. In 2005 a petition was filed in court asking the government to restore the rights of dalit Christians.¹² This matter was referred to the Justice Ranganath Misra Commission which approved the demands of the dalit Christians in May 2007. Since then the National Commission on scheduled castes, scheduled tribes (sts) and minority commissions have been discussing these matters as dalit Muslims have also raised similar demands.¹³

Apart from the debate over these conversions within the dalit community, many state governments have created tensions by deciding to grant sc community certificate to children of

converted Christian parents who revert to Hinduism.¹⁴ Some state governments – Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat – enacted and amended The Freedom of Religion Acts, known as “anti conversion” laws that are supposed to prohibit religious conversions made by “force”, “fraud” or “allurement”. Right wing groups have supported these prohibitions on the ground of religious revival, moral regeneration and the resurgence of the Indian nation. Many Christian groups say that in reality these laws obstruct the individual liberty provided in the Constitution. Moreover these laws are used to harass Christian workers. The law prohibits an individual from using “force, inducement or fraudulent means” when contributing in speech or conduct to another individual’s religious conversion.

Most of these responses have been to Christian conversions but have raised questions about the relationship of caste, religion and affirmative action in general. These laws do not explicitly ban conversions in practice but these laws both by design and implementation infringe upon an individual’s right to convert, and represent a significant challenge to Indian secularism. There is also increasingly a demand to delink caste from religion which has serious implications in redefining the beneficiaries of affirmative action policies in India. A public interest litigation (PIL) in 2009 was filed to include neo-Buddhists as among SC and ST category in the High Court, Mumbai to increase the number of Lok Sabha and legislative assembly seats reserved for backward classes. Regarding this as a systematic denial of rights the petitioner has urged the court to restrain the government from announcing the date of the forthcoming assembly elections until neo-Buddhists are also given recognition as SCs and STs. If the neo-Buddhists would have been counted among the SC, ST population in 2001 Census it would add to the existing population the latter taking them to be 16.23%.¹⁵

Culture and Liberal Politics

A second challenge is that while Ambedkar addressed the problem of religion he has not given due recognition to culture. Not much time was spent in relating the cultural transformation with the political strategies of affirmative action or the ideal of secularism. The separate social and cultural identity of Dalits was certainly acknowledged but their tradition was considered unworthy. In social life they were considered as having a separate social and cultural entity with the most subordinate and polluting status linked to roles allotted by the caste system. At the same time they were included in principle in the Hindu population though the different forms of their cultural contributions were never acknowledged.

For these reasons Ambedkar tried to stop the traditional Mahar work of “dragging the dead cattle out of the villages and the practice of eating carrion; dress well, don’t drink don’t beg, get educated and be self-respecting” (Zelliot 1996: 131). In 1942 when recalling the progress made, Ambedkar’s references were not only to “political gains but also to the process of self-purification of those practices”. He declared that the person from the SC community has “stopped eating dead animals and observing meaningless Hindu customs and now had the privilege of sending representatives to the legislature” (Zelliot 1996: 131).

A second strong challenge draws on debates on global ethics. From the 1970s “traditional Buddhism” and Ambedkarite Buddhism have come into contact with a modernist brand found in Nepal, Tibet and South-east Asia, with its innovative stress on explicating Buddhist principles and its anti-hierarchical stance. In the last two decades Buddhists worldwide have joined with other members of religious traditions on human rights (Sivaraksa 1998). Contemplative aspects of Buddhism which Ambedkar did not stress upon are much in vogue today (Zelliot 1992: 194). More significantly a new spirit of Buddhism is manifest in the increased meditation movements, publications, education, as well as philanthropic works. There is clearly a shift in the thinking of many Buddhists from another-worldly outlook to a more active participation in the affairs of this world.

To what extent can Ambedkar’s interpretation of social action find a positive meaning in contemporary Dalit politics? If Buddhism has a social message, and it functions like a civil religion in India to what extent can it exist without the backing of institutions and more relevant finances which have become the driving force in many countries? Does Ambedkar’s Buddhism have creative insight and vision sufficient to foster a supranational community with a sense of collective responsibility?

Rejoinder: Historical and Philosophical Considerations

Ambedkar’s interpretation of Buddhism and approach to culture has to be located within the enlightenment ethos that arrived in India along with English education that questioned the foundation of beliefs of the colonial people. In a very general sense he was part of a generation of 20th century social theorists who lived their formative intellectual lives outside India. Yet in his arguments we can find purposes that place him within the context of activists and scholars struggling to redeem the modern project of emancipation under colonialism. To this period belong both the rediscovery and critique of traditions within Hinduism through the social reform and radicalism of Jyotiba Phule’s (1827-1890) Satyashodak Samaj. Buddhism belonged to those reform movements which articulated a critique of Hinduism since the fifth and sixth centuries. The retrieval and reconstruction of Buddhism took two distinct streams – one supported by European orientalist and the other by men of subalternised communities. Anchoring themselves solidly on the resonance of “Buddha’s social message” to that of “modernity” the scholars went about the “process of constructing plural forms of Buddhism” (Narasu 2002: vii).¹⁶

As a leader of the Dalit movement who became one of the architects of the Indian Constitution, Ambedkar set out to question the aims of the national movement. His main argument was that political democracy was meaningless without social transformation. Yet the assertion for a casteless society looked extremely dubious from the point of view of the liberal ideal of equal treatment found in the Indian Constitution. In assessing his approach to the question of culture, much seems to hang on which way around we ask. Whether we are taking liberalism as the fixed point and then asking whether and to what extent it can accommodate cultural commitment? Or are we accepting culture as a frozen and fixed point and asking whether it can be accommodated within a liberal framework?

Ambedkar's approach is to do with neither for reasons I explore below. From 1933 onwards the defeat in the Poona Pact over separate electorates meant that either "untouchables" were to be at the mercy of paternalism (toleration?) of upper castes or they were to be incorporated in such a way as to render the assertion of "difference" unnecessary. Later in the constituent assembly Ambedkar realised that theoretical arguments on non-discrimination and protection of differences for minorities were not helpful for dalits to achieve complete swaraj (freedom). Non-discrimination in civil society means that cultural boundaries tend to break down. Members of one group will meet and befriend members of other groups and adopt new identities and practices. How were the dalits as a group to retain autonomy by giving up or retaining their (subordinate or polluting) cultural identities? This was unclear.

In practice, liberal politics in the 1960s was fundamentally assimilationist; it incorporated people into the nation state project and ignored special rights. When Ambedkar examined the inequalities of the social sphere he was arguing against the assimilationist ideals of Gandhi, liberal politics as well as the vocabulary of minority groups; he did not want dalits to be integrated into mainstream Hindu society or to maintain their cultural distinctiveness. That was the strength of his argument. He did not ask for preservation of their distinct identity. He urged the dalits to critically reflect on their subordinate position and rid them of that identity. Moreover they were expected to reject long-standing practices of their groups. Unlike many exponents of group rights today, he did not ask the dalits to be left alone, or to let them live according to the practices laid down by caste society. He did not want the dalits to preserve their way of life but to redefine it.

Two developments contributed to the progressive erosion of his interest in liberal politics. Ambedkar was aware that dalit groups wielded unequal power and that access to policy process was unbalanced within the liberal framework he so arduously set up; disillusionment with liberal pluralism and group politics was setting in. On the one hand, given the widely varying resources of different groups, it was clear that access to decision-making could be effectively blocked. On the other hand it was becoming clear that emphasis on redistributive issues by the Congress Party and their keen absorption of prominent dalit issues would reduce the significance of dalit "common interests".

From a liberal point of view, by seeking conversion, Ambedkar was arguing for an individual's freedom to associate, to form communities and to live by his own terms based on equal concern in the social sphere. A corollary of this is that the individual should be free to disassociate from such communities. Initially in *Annihilation of Caste* he writes that

the assertion by the individual of his own opinions and beliefs, his own independence and interest as over against groups standards, group authority and groups interests is the beginning of all reform.

In a scenario where

the group is intolerant and does not bother about the means it adopts to stifle such individuals they will perish and the reform will die out (Ambedkar 1989b, 56).

His view placed great weight on individual liberty and the nature of cultural communities as voluntary associations.

Criticising the *chaturvarnya* (state of four varnas) system he explains that "unless there is a penalty attached to the act of transgression, men will not keep to their respective classes" (Ambedkar 1989b: 60). Since caste membership is determined by birth rather than by deliberate choice it is clearly a coercive association. There is no option of entry for those born outside even though groups might seek to redefine their boundaries. This led Ambedkar to argue that there existed a (formal, voluntary and inclusive) political community of rights and a (informal, coercive, exclusive) cultural community at the level of civil society. This distinction indicates sharply the limits of liberal politics he was deeply enmeshed in.

But my defence of Ambedkar being critical of a liberal view of politics will be subjected to numerous objections and needs to be refined. Ambedkar had to rework many of his own positions before embarking upon the conversion to Buddhism. While located within liberal framework he was aware of the limitations of its moral categories. Working within a liberal polity his focus was on ensuring the existence of a context of choice; cultural membership of a new community will proceed from critical reflection and thus function as an expression of autonomy. In liberal theory individuals are free to leave, to renounce membership of their associations and to reconstitute their cultural communities. His move towards conversion offered the first systematic critique of the nation state project; it returned the study of Indian political thought to the traditional dualist perspectives; the problem of modern political regimes as resting upon an unencumbered self or as communities defining selves and personhoods.

To resolve this problematic, his systematic exposition, one in which fundamental teachings of the human condition are addressed along with the specific socio-historical conditions, is about how different cultures and religions define a path of action. Let me distinguish three steps in the argument for defending what I had presented earlier.

The first step is to start with what Ambedkar calls the "doctrine of impermanence". What comes to be must cease to be. There exists only a momentary convergence of factors (Love 1965: 305). He disputes any permanent and fixed system of classification of men and depicts the Buddhist notion of "being is becoming" as implying that a human being is not the same at two different moments of his life.

If an individual self exists momentarily what possible significance can be assigned to the moral responsibility for the social? This becomes clear with the second step that dukkha was not just that of an individual person. Nor was it only of one particular caste, the Mahars of Maharashtra to which he belonged (Narain and Ahir 1994). A predominant theme in Ambedkar's interpretation has been what is called the social self. This conception acknowledges the role of social relationships and human community in constituting both self-identity and the nature and meaning of individual life. Thus he defends what may be called relational theories of the self. As Fuchs points out, because "suffering, the way Ambedkar conceives it, is primarily inflicted upon man by man, dhamma is needed to recognise it and to remove this suffering from the world" (2004: 315). Ambedkar introduces a perspectival shift into the interpretation of Buddhism; a

religion which calls upon men to renounce and transcend the world is converted into a “prerequisite essential to secure the working of society”. In this way “Dhamma at one and the same time is seen as a moral code – for both the individual’s conduct of life and social interaction – and as a constitutional necessity for society” (Fuchs 2004: 315).

The final step in his argument would be to see the objective of social change not to be obtained from electoral politics and processes leading to modernisation or liberal democracy but from changes in individual subjectivity. It is significant that the identity he sought was to come not by remaining within the caste system against which he was struggling, but by going outside it. This identity could not be born in a system which was governed by discriminatory social laws but in Buddhism alone which made morality the essence and foundation of religion. For him “what the Hindus call religion is really law or at best legalised class-ethics”. Its main drawback is that it tends to “deprive moral life of freedom and spontaneity and to reduce it to more or less anxious and servile conformity to externally imposed rules” (1989b: 76). In 1935 Ambedkar urged at the conference at Yeola to consider their religious identity as a choice, not a fact of destiny and in this way connected theory of social action with individual salvation.

However this would remain a weak rejoinder until we locate this within the politics he was pursuing as I have tried to above. On the whole it seems prudent to accept the argument that he distinguished between concept clusters and juxtaposed such moral clusters to the domain of ethics. Ambedkar would respond that “traditional” Buddhism had no equivalents for such terms as freedom, liberty, individual, action which we use today; from that one cannot conclude that it offers no relevant ethical teachings at all – a conclusion that is an obstacle to cross-cultural engagement. Similarly dhamma is attractive and meritorious in many ways but also subject to severe limitations. Actually even if the concept clusters are different, Buddhism invokes the idea of an individual as necessarily engaged in social contexts and as exhibiting their nature in human interactions and patterns of shared responsiveness.

Buddhism and the Global Society

To the last challenge let me assert that conversion enabled many ex-dalits to join the world Buddhist community and engage in cross-cultural exchanges ending their isolation as a subjugated group. It also enabled them to join forces with other Indian religious minorities. However, over the years although there have been contacts between different bhikkhus the lives of neo-Buddhists have been a local affair. Yet in this way the decentralised structure of Ambedkar’s Buddhism makes it very modern; a self-organised, non-hierarchical, participatory and non-exclusive community.

The significance of a lack of institutional basis can be understood by relying on the distinction in contemporary political theory invoked by Thomas Pogge between “institutional and interactional approaches” (Pogge 1992: 105-06). Although Ambedkar does not apply this distinction I believe that this is important in order to see the relevance of dhamma within the

global context. The main impacts of economic globalisation is its distributional effects worldwide due to unemployment and increasing wage gaps between the rich and poor. While these dimensions of globalisation are outside the scope of this paper, there are other aspects where Buddhism plays an important role. As it idealises a monastic way of life and prescribes minimalistic lifestyle it may be considered incompatible with the consumerism of contemporary post-capitalist cultures. A cursory look at Buddha’s teachings shows that they are concerned with the unlimited nature of human wants that can never be fulfilled. Its basic purpose lies in its concept of well-being as it extorts us to exercise restraint on consumption and advocates judicious usage of resources. Although the trend amongst the upwardly mobile dalits that advocate *vipashyana* (meditation) as the essence of Buddhism has been criticised, there are many aspects of neo-Buddhist thought that can be developed to attack the basic aspects of globalisation. The attempt to gain some transcendent perspective is understandable, when immanent techniques such as political nationalism, socialism, and even economic progress fail. After all in spite of their ever increasing power, globalisation instrumentalities leave vast areas of social life undetermined and create problems of personal or group identity, increasing disparities in wealth, power and life chances. Here a conservative option grounded in traditional, communally-oriented societies offers a more clear path; a religious message allows the dichotomisation of the world into right and wrong; it also sometimes stresses on a particular group-cultural code as the manifestation of divine will.

As part of a liberal option, in most parts of the world religion is a domain of voluntary activity on a level with other privatised pursuits. Religious organisations and interaction-based networks are part of the privatising trends embedded in globalising modernity that have domesticated political spaces. This is manifested in inter-faith meetings and in the “dialogue of civilisations” that help articulate a new internationalism that goes beyond economics or technological independence.

However if there is a social movement that focuses on local and global problems, environmental and social justice issues, then they can mobilise around vital issues and make a difference. In sum regardless of whether the dilemma regarding the dichotomy is solved in a liberal or conservative direction, neo-Buddhist notions are unlikely to provide a moral foundation for political practices and institutions that replace liberal democracy at an international level. They will however raise questions as seriously engaged participants in contemporary society and politics (Fiske and Emmrich 2004).

Ambedkar’s reinterpretation of Buddhism gives us an account of action that is based on democratic politics of contest and resistance. It relies on a reading of the self as a multiple creature that exceeds the constructions of liberal autonomy. Insofar as Buddhist groups do not jeopardise or restrict their member’s capacities and opportunities to make any decision about their own lives, they do not risk violating democratic principles. But to remain socially relevant they must continue to have practical effects on the social world which is so neatly intertwined with the political in present day India.

NOTES

- 1 Some scholars privileged the earliest available texts as Davids in Lopez Jr ed. (1995). For many Indian scholars Buddhism has an independent tradition see, A K Narain and D C Ahir, ed. (1994).
- 2 The Mahars are the largest scheduled caste group in the state of Maharashtra.
- 3 This could be called 'fundamentalist' if it advocates the conflation of the political and religious realms. Insisting that religious insights and values be incorporated in political decision-making and action is a conflation of realms but there is no way Ambedkar's interpretation would qualify for this.
- 4 I use the term 'traditional Buddhism' to refer to the teachings of the Buddha that developed around 563-483 BC. Concepts in Buddhism have been interpreted in different ways and continue to be contested. See Sivaraksa (1998).
- 5 I have argued elsewhere that we cannot locate the conversion to Buddhism within the tradition-modernity debate as his position is much more complex (Verma 1999). I had shown some 'mis-givings' about the way Ambedkar interpreted Buddhism. Since then I have revised that position. See Ganguly for a critique (2005: 158-59).
- 6 I think Martin Fuchs goes too far to claim that for Ambedkar Buddhism is a "post-religious religion; a religion that transcends religious distinctions... and also a religion which overcomes the cleft between religion and politics" (2004: 261).
- 7 The term "classical republicanism" is used in a broad sense to refer to Ambedkar's interest of determining the common good and encouraging civic commitment among members of the political community and his interest in a system of governance that stresses liberty and rights.
- 8 Belief in karma is the determination of man's position in present life by deeds done by him in his past life. Broadly it is a concept that explains causality through which beneficial effects are derived from past beneficial actions and harmful effects from wrong actions.
- 9 "30 Lakh Dalits Convert to Buddhism", *Times of India*, New Delhi, 10 November 2006.
- 10 "Hundreds Embrace Buddhism in Gulbarga", *Times of India*, Bangalore, 15 October 2006. See <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/2171942>.
- 11 "Udit Raj Defends Conversions", *Times of India*, New Delhi, 2 December 2002. Kanshi Ram, the BSP leader was cremated as per Buddhist rituals though he never converted. See for more "Kanshi Ram Cremated as Per Buddhist Rituals", *The Hindu*, New Delhi, 10 October 2006.
- 12 In 2004: the Centre for Public Interest Litigation filed a PIL (civil writ 180/2004) in the supreme court which demands that the unjust paragraph 3 of the 1950 order must be deleted so that dalit Christians can be granted SC status.
- 13 "SC Status for Dalit Christians. Centre Seeks More Time", *Indian Express*, 24 January 2008; Also "The Long Wait: Will the Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians Ever See the Dawn", *Pasmanda Muslim Forum*, 15 March 2010.
- 14 "Dalit Christians Can Get SC Status by Re-conversion", *Times of India*, Chennai, 3 April 2009.
- 15 A PIL has been filed by Swvapnil Bhingardevay Source: dnaindia.com, 13 July 2009, http://www.dnaindia.com/mumbai/report_pil-to-include-neo-buddhists-in-sc-st-category-filed-in-hc_1273443
- 16 See work on rationalists and social reformers in Narain (1980) 14-18; Narasu (2002).

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