
DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR'S VIEWS ON RELIGION: AN ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT-

One of the brilliant sons of India, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956) not only proved his mettle as a distinguished scholar, teacher, parliamentarian, administrator, leader, economist, social reformer but also as a great religious expert. He dwells in the heart of Indians not only as the architect of the Indian constitution but also for his assiduous struggle for the pride and amelioration of the untouchables of India against the strongly entrenched hierarchical Hindu caste system and precisely against the social apartheid prevalent in the fold of Hinduism.

Ambedkar himself was a religious person to the core of his heart. But the caste-based discriminations and oppressions meted out to him and his Mahar community by the upper caste Hindus made him its strong critique. The unequal treatment meted out to his society by them led him to embrace the Buddhism, which provided the untouchables the way to gain equality. He considered morality as the new god, the binding and moving force of society and human beings. His vision of human beings and society comprised of religion and morality minus its ritualism and superstition.

KEY WORDS- Religion, Discrimination, Untouchables, Dalit, Constitution.

INTRODUCTION

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (14 April, 1891-6 December, 1956) was a unique phenomenon in the social and political arena of modern India. Among various contributions of Ambedkar, the two most monumental were the framing of the Indian constitution and his assiduous struggle for the pride and amelioration of the untouchables of India against the strongly entrenched hierarchical Hindu caste system. He was a strong advocate against Hindu religious discrimination of the untouchables and a fearless critic of the leading figures of Indian independence including Mahatma Gandhi and also of the pan-Indian political instrument, namely, the Indian National Congress. Born in the Mahar caste, an untouchable community of Maharashtra, he received the best and highest education undreamt of by any untouchable caste person of his age.¹ His life, works and ideas were shaped by personalities like Kabir, Jotiba Phule and Buddha. In religious affiliations, Dr. Ambedkar's family belonged to the Kabir Panthi. During the last quarter of the fifteenth and the opening decades of the sixteenth century, Kabir attacked caste distinction as also religious differences and preached the gospel of loving devotion to the One and loving God.² The causes dearest to Ambedkar for which he spent the most valuable times of his life was the development and uplift of the untouchables and depressed classes of India. Ambedkar sought not only to uplift their social and material status but aspired to convert them into a perfect human being in every sense. For this, he paid more emphasis on social democracy than political democracy. He did not hesitate to criticize even Mahatma Gandhi as well as other Congress leaders for their soft approach towards the uplift of untouchables, who just labelled them as "Harijan" within the Hindu fold and argued that political democracy and consciousness would automatically improve their conditions in Indian

society. Thus, the endeavours on the part of Ambedkar for improving the status of the untouchables, his views on religion and most importantly his conversion into the fold of Buddhism along with his followers can be analysed in the next paragraphs.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The paper intends to exhibit the inhuman social treatment meted out to him as well as his community on religious grounds by the Hindu caste system. It narrates the endeavours made by Ambedkar for gaining socio-religious equality to the untouchables. It further deals with the circumstances which led him to renounce the Hinduism and embrace the Buddhism, which, according to him, was supposed to provide a separate identity to the untouchables.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Works on B.R. Ambedkar and his religious views are galore in the academic arena for the scholars and intellectuals. **Dhananjay Keer** (1954) explains in his **Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission**, the contribution of Ambedkar to Indian thought, history, literature and the constitution and of his place in the evolution of Hinduism and its phases. His conversion to Buddhism and the last years of his life are also fully described. Extensive quotations from historic interviews, inspiring speeches add another dimension to the book. It also gives an illuminating account of Ambedkar's search for knowledge, his heroic struggle for the liberation of a suppressed people in bondage, his confrontation with Mahatma Gandhi and other eminent Indian leaders and his verdict on Hinduism.

Ambedkar and Buddhism of Sangharakshita (1986) provides us an account of Ambedkar's career, the reasons which led him to convert in Buddhism and what Buddhism meant to him. Sangharakshita was a western thinker and a Buddhist by choice spent much of his time in India and claimed to be close to Ambedkar also described the pathetic condition of the untouchables in India in 1980s.

Anne M. Blackburn's (1993) article **Religion, Kinship and Buddhism: Ambedkar's Vision of a Moral Community**, published in the Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies observed that Ambedkar looked at Buddha's struggle as an indigenous cultural response to degraded Aryan society. To Ambedkar, the dominant society during the days of Buddha was a Brahmanical Aryan community leading a socially and religiously degraded way of life. Buddha revolted against the anarchy of the Brahmanical way of life and succeeded in containing the Brahmanism. In the same way, Ambedkar argued that the history of India was nothing but the history of struggle between Brahmanism and Buddhism and vowed to retransform India into a Buddhist India in his life time.

Valerian Rodrigues's (2011) **Ambedkar on Religion and Modernity** shows reservation about his religious thinking particularly his conversion to Buddhism. It explains that his conversion resulted in harming the secular features of the country. The event reinforced obscurantism and created obstacles in the path of the natural orientation of the people that he represented to a radical alternative to their condition. Despite the availability of all these books, articles and other writings, an account of his ideas regarding Hinduism and other religions prevalent in India and his subsequent conversion to Buddhism is always welcome.

HYPOTHESIS

B. R. Ambedkar was perhaps one of the most extraordinary and controversial personalities born on the arena of Indian politics and history. He is considered to be the messiah of the depressed people, father of the Indian constitution, a celebrated economist and a dominant politician. It shows that very few people could have carried so many identities with as much strength and effectiveness as Ambedkar. Therefore, it can be said that manifold identities which he possessed have been a subject of intensive and rigorous dissertation across the nation. But among all of the identities and parts he has been loved and hated for, one stands, to some extent little unattended - that is related to his agony and affliction for the socially depressed Mahar community and the untouchables, keeping aside the inhuman

treatment meted out to him personally being a member of the so called low caste. So, least to say, the significant hypothesis of the paper is to place the Ambedkar's monumental thinking regarding the unimposing principles of Hinduism those days before the masses.

METHODOLOGY

The present study is mainly based on primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consisting of government documents, speeches, letters and other correspondence, accounts of interviews etc. have been taken into consideration. Secondary sources in the form of books, journals, articles from magazines, journal and newspapers, biographical works, literature reviews, book reviews etc. have been collected from different sources such as national and district libraries, government offices etc. for framing the article.

SUBJECT

Ambedkar's family, the Sakpals, had their ancestral home in the tiny-village of Ambadave in the present Mandangad sub-division of the district of Ratnagiri on the western coast of Maharashtra. Ambedkar's father and his grandfather were in the army. After the birth of Bhimrao at MHOW on 14th April, 1891, Subedar Ramji, Bhimrao's father, retired as Head-master of an army normal school. The family then settled for a brief while at Dapoli, and young Bhimrao started his primary education there. But that was for a very short while, as the family soon moved to Satara. Young Bhimrao started his primary education a fresh there in 1896. While at Satara, the young people had the bitter experience of the Indian disease of untouchability and paradoxically, it was at Satara that a friendly class teacher changed Bhimrao's surname to Ambedkar, which was his own surname.³ Subsequently, Bhimrao's family moved again to Bombay in 1901 and started living in the Dabak chawl in the textile mill area of Parel. Shortly after that, Bhimrao joined the Elphinstone High School; and later, on passing the Matriculation examination, he graduated from the Elphinstone College affiliated to the University of Bombay in 1912.

India is an ancient land with a holy past. Dr. Ambedkar had to wage a war on that past. On his return from England after the completion of his studies, he addressed himself to the task of organizing the depressed classes. In March, 1924, he founded the Bahiskrit Hitakarini Sabha in Bombay for the purpose. In 1927, Ambedkar took up the challenge of the Chavdar water tank of Mahad, a small town in the present Raigad district of Maharashtra. He asserted the fundamental right of the untouchables to draw water from it. Next year, he challenged the Hindu orthodoxy by publicly burning the hated Manu-Smriti, the bed-rock of Hindu fundamentalism. The burning of the Manu-Smriti was a deed of great daring. It was an attack on the very citadel of the Hinduism. After this incident, Ambedkar registered his protest against the intransigent Brahmin priesthood of the Parvati temple of Pune in 1929; the Kalaram temple of Nasik in 1930; and the Guruvayur temple of Kerala in 1931. He crossed words with the redoubtable Mahatma Gandhi at the Round Table Conference in 1931; and had unpleasant experience of Gandhi's unfair methods until the signing of the Poona Pact in September, 1932. On May, 1931, Ambedkar delivered his famous speech on Mukte Kon Pathe? (Which way to emancipation?). The subject matter of the speech was "Change your religion". The stage was now set for the memorable conference at Yeola in Nasik district. On 13th October, 1935, Ambedkar declared his resolve to renounce Hinduism for good.⁴ Although, he gave such indication in May, 1929 at Jalgaon, yet at the conference of the Depressed Classes on this day, he made a positive statement with the historic declaration that circumstances beyond his control had placed him in the untouchable community but he would certainly not die as a Hindu for sure.⁵ "It is the inequality in Hinduism," he said, "that compels me to quit Hinduism. I had the misfortune of being born with the stigma of untouchability; that is not my fault. But, I will not die as a Hindu; this is within my power". In 1936, shortly after the famous declaration that he would not die as a Hindu, Ambedkar conceded that:

"What the consequences of conversion will be to the country as a whole is well worth bearing in mind. Conversion to Islam or Christianity will denationalize the depressed classes. If they go to Islam, the

number of Muslims will be doubled....and the danger of Muslim domination also becomes real. If they go to Christianity.....it will strengthen the hold of Britain on the country”.

After Yeola, Ambedkar spelt out his radical views on Hinduism, caste and untouchability, the Himalayan debris of India's 'dead-wood of the past'. Without wasting time, Ambedkar convened a meeting of the Mahars at Bombay in May- June, 1936 to sound their reaction to his call at Yeola for conversion. On 14th October, 1956, Ambedkar embraced Buddhism along with a large number of untouchables about two months before his death on 6th December, 1956. On the eve of conversion, Ambedkar described his choice of Buddhism as the least harmful route for the country since Buddhism is 'a part and parcel of Bharatiya culture'. 'I have taken care', he declared, "that my conversion will not harm the tradition of the culture and history of this land".⁶

Ambedkar contributed an article named, "The Buddha and The Future of His Religion" to the Maha Bodhi of Calcutta in 1950. In the article, Ambedkar emphasized morality. "The religion of the Buddha is morality", he says. The "Buddhist religion is nothing, if not morality", he says. Secondly, he said that Buddhism was based on reason and experience. "In the Mahaparinibbana Sutta," it is pointed out, "he (Buddha) told Ananda that his religion was based on reason and experience, and that his followers should not accept his teachings as correct and binding merely because they emanated from him. Being based on reason and experience, they were free to modify or even abandon any of his teachings, if it was found that, at any given time and in given circumstances, they do not apply. He wished his religion not to be encumbered with the dead-wood of the past. Thirdly, he maintained that religion "must be in accord with science. Religion is bounced to lose respect....if it is not in accord with science". Fourthly, he said, "religion, as a code of social morality, must recognize the fundamental tenets of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity". To be noted here that Ambedkar once considered converting to Sikhism, which encouraged opposition to oppression and so appealed to leaders of scheduled castes. But after meeting with Sikh leaders, he concluded that he might get 'second-rate' Sikh status.⁷

Despite India's claim as being a secular state and Ambedkar's personal participation of being the co-architect of the Indian constitution, he was powerless to bring about social change towards social equality. The obstinacy and rigidity of caste-based oppressions in the Indian social arena continued unabated. Constitution was a mere paper-promise that contained only sublime ideals far removed from reality. He felt forced to choose the radical path of socio-religious protest. As recorded by Ambedkar in his writings, these caste-based discriminations and oppressions were personally suffered by him in his professional and political life; he was also a witness to the sufferings faced on a daily basis by his caste community. His conversion was therefore intended by him as a determined and deliberate way forward in the direction of social emancipation of communities oppressed by caste-based aggression and in this case sanctioned by the Hindu religious ethos and doctrines.⁸

The following elements among others are found from his speeches, writings and a host of other publications which, most probably, led to his religious conversion. (a) It was a personal and communitarian protest directed against the Hindu religion, which permitted inequalities and social discriminations in the name of religion. (b) He was motivated by the strong belief that Buddhism possessed the perfect answer to his search for meaningful social equality, egalitarianism and freedom from all forms of discrimination. (c) It was indirectly a challenge to Hindu religion to transform and modernize its creeds.⁹ In other words, Ambedkar's primary focus was not criticism of the Brahmanical system with intent to change that system of social relations through emphasis on shared and encompassing Indian morality. Instead, he used a polemical critique of Brahmanical socio-religious dominance as the foundation upon which to develop an India based alternative to the Brahmanical social order. This alternative is, significantly, designed to coexist with rather than displace the Brahmanical Hinduism. Ambedkar's historical view of Brahmanical- Buddhist relations and his discussion of religion, morality, social welfare and nationalism reflect this strikingly different strategy for the mobilization of the untouchables. The understanding of Buddhism and its role in the creation of a moral social order makes it clear that Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism aimed to develop a community of neo-Buddhist righteousness co-existent with other religious communities in post- independent India.¹⁰

Some other factors for his conversion into Buddhism need to be explained. Ambedkar desired a separate identity for the depressed classes in the modern Indian society so that with the passage of time, they would not relapse into the same hierarchical Hindu fold and bear its scaffold. This would negate their achievements in socio-economic terms and again push them back in the moribund social order. Actually, Ambedkar's motive behind the conversion was to put the final seal of approval of a separate identity for the untouchables. Further, he stated that the conversion was not aimed at material gains but was exclusively a spiritual and religious quest. This seems partly correct. In fact, it was the fear of loss of hard won political privileges from the government for the depressed classes which had earlier checked Ambedkar from embracing any other religion. During conversion to Buddhism in 1956, being aware of this trap, he took the calculated risk. He had emphatically assured his followers to trust him that privileges and concession lost due to conversion to Buddhism by the depressed people would soon be regained.¹¹

Different interpreters of Ambedkar's views on Buddhism as a tradition of social reform possess almost uniform opinions:

'The Buddha provided one of the earliest critiques of orthodox Brahmanism, which for centuries propagated social and spiritual inferiority of women and the lower castes. The Buddha attempted to counter Brahmanism with a philosophy of spiritual equality and a notion of atheistic morality as the essence of social and religious duty. Ambedkar coupled these aspects of the Buddha's philosophy with an emphasis on rationalism to create a vision of a secular and egalitarian society'.¹²

Further studies reveal that the character of Buddhism as an Indian religion was a crucial reason for its choice by Ambedkar rather than, for instance, the Christianity. Common sense appears to dictate that compatibility with the surrounding Indian culture was essential to the psychological renewal promised by Buddhist conversion. Besides, the untouchables sought compensatory equality from two sources- Indian spiritual idealism and western introduced democracy.¹³ Owen Lynch proceeds similarly concluding that Buddhism was truly Indian, yet it was also ideologically consistent with (the untouchables) goal of mobility and the new idea they had come to accept.¹⁴

Finally, it can be said that the declaration and desire of Ambedkar to embrace Buddhism was compelled by a number of discriminatory socio-political factors, which were legitimized by the Hindu religious ethos and its doctrinal hermeneutics of the caste hierarchical structure. Ambedkar's protestant action led to significant mass conversions from among his caste community and from other socially marginalized groups, who shared this disappointment and dissatisfaction with the Hindu religious identity, they had inherited at birth. Then, as well as now, Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism is understood, interpreted and followed by many as a vocal and vibrant social protest against the Hindu religion's caste-based oppressions and discriminations.¹⁵ Scholarly treatments of Ambedkar and his movement uniformly assert that his conversion to Buddhism was an attempt to strengthen the Mahar community against the dominant Hindu social and political hierarchy by providing his followers with an alternative and egalitarian identity. Ambedkar drew upon Indian cultural resources as well as oriental interpretations of Buddhism in order to create a model for a moral community ideologically co-existent with, although not, subordinate to the Brahmanical Hinduism and Indian nationalism.¹⁶ To be noted, his conversion to Buddhism sparked a revival in interest in Buddhist philosophy in India and abroad.¹⁷

FINDINGS/RESULT

India is the second most populated country (132 crores) in the world with nearly a fifth of the world's population. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes comprise about 17 % and 9 % respectively of India's population. Since the independence of India, these people were given reservation status, guarantying political representation. The Constitution provides a three-pronged strategy, viz. protective arrangements, affirmative action and development to improve their socio-economic status. But, there is no scope to be complacent. Efforts from the top government level to the village level are required to be implemented for these people to bring them in the society of humanity.

CONCLUSION

Ambedkar's bequest as a social, political and religious reformer had a deep effect on modern India. In post-modern era, his ideas and thoughts are respected across the political spectrum. His initiatives have influenced various spheres of life and transformed the way India today looks at socio-economic policies, education and affirmative action through socio-economic and legal incentives. So, in the period of celebration of the 125th anniversary of Baba Saheb Bhimrao Ambedkar with great fanfare, the real tribute to him on part of us would be to treat all human beings not on the parameter of caste, creed and status rather on the basis of humanity as well as to materialize his dream of propagation and revival of Buddhism in its very birth place.

SUGGESTIONS

The movement started by Ambedkar for the amelioration of the so called depressed community in the name of religion in our country should not be stopped, rather the younger generation should actively participate in it. Sometimes the smallest things we do for our neighbourhoods can have the biggest impact. We need to change our attitude and mentality towards people of other caste, creed, section, religion etc. We must respect and be tolerant towards the people of other caste, creed, religion, habits etc. We must develop a sense of oneness that India is our mother land and its people are our brothers and sisters. This will be the fittest tribute to our very own, Baba Saheb.

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