

Impact Factor-8.575 (SJIF)

ISSN-2278-9308

B.Aadhar

Single Blind Peer-Reviewed & Refereed Indexed

Multidisciplinary International Research Journal

SOCIAL REFORMERS IN INDIA

February -2023

ISSUE No- (CCCXCVII) 397- C



Chief Editor
Prof. Virag S. Gawande
Director
Aadhar Social
Research & Development
Training Institute Amravati

Editor
Dr Satish Sasane
Head, Department of
Sociology Mahatma Phule
College, Ahmedpur
TQ Ahmedpur Dist. Latur ,
Maharashtra

Editor
Dr. Baliram Pawar
Head, Department of Sociology
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Aadhar PUBLICATIONS



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Aadhar Publication ,Aadhar Social Research & Development Training Institute, New Hanuman Nagar,

In Front Of Pathyapustak Mandal, Behind V.M.V. College,Amravati

(M.S) India _Pin- 444604 **Email :** aadharpublication@gmail.com

Website : www.aadharsocial.com **Mobile :** 9595560278 /



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Contextualizing Ambedkar's Spiritualism

Dr Surender Singh

Assistant Professor of English Government College Birohar (Jhajjar)

E-mail: dr.s.singh26@gmail.com ,Contact No: 9416812691

Abstract

A Great Man must be motivated by the dynamics of a social purpose and must act as the scourge and the scavenger of society. The present paper is a sincere endeavour by analysing to embark upon the spiritual journey and eventually transformation of Bhim Rao Ambedkar to Babasaheb Ambedkar. The two outstanding endeavours and achievements of Ambedkar most celebrated today are the battle for the annihilation of caste and the framing of India's Constitution. Both were truly radical ventures, one challenging the very deep-rooted foundation of Indian society and the other laying the groundwork for transformative changes in every aspect of life in the decades to come. How often do we see it remarked even to this day, that in so many respects, different parts of India and Indian society still remain years behind the radical provisions of the Constitutional frame. It has, indeed, been hard to keep pace with the radicalism of Ambedkar.

Keywords: caste, Varna System, untouchability, awakening, conversion, spiritualism, self-respect.

Introduction

Dr B. R. Ambedkar was a saviour of the suppressed classes, a noted Jurist, the chief architect of India constitution, a profound scholar, a daring leader and the greatest proper of Indian constitution. The role played by Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar has left its imprint on the social tapestry of the country after independence and shaped the political and civic contours of India today. It would have been a different India without him and in all probability, a much more inequitable and unjust one. He attempted to forge India's moral and social foundations anew and strove for a political order of constitutional democracy that is sensitive to disadvantage in heritage from the past or engendered by prevailing social relations. He became deeply aware of the resources that history and culture offered for an emancipator project but argued that they can become effective only through the matrix of the present.

But what I am contending is that even more than these extraordinary contributions, it is Ambedkar's insistence on a spiritualisation of human life, which constitutes the truly notable radicalism of his political struggle. To fully appreciate this, we need to pay far greater attention to Ambedkar's relentless life-long search for a spiritual path and a spiritual homeground for society, which went way beyond his efforts at transforming India – they were truly heroic efforts to find the deepest solution for the intractable problem of suffering on earth, for all beings, human and non-human, living and non-living. And for him this spirituality was not something restricted to the personal sphere. Indeed, his spirituality, based as it was on an understanding of the inter-connectedness of all beings on earth, did not allow for a crude separation of the personal and the political. For in his vision, the one was well and truly embedded in the other, with each defining and redefining the other. To put it simply, for Ambedkar, the challenge of social transformation was inextricably bound to the task of inner transformation. One could not happen without the other. This was his most radical contribution. This is also his most forgotten legacy but the one that I believe has the greatest relevance and resonance in the 21st century.

Conversion to Buddhism

In October 1956, Ambedkar and half a million of his followers, converted to Buddhism. Less than two months later, only days after he had completed his definitive study of Buddhism *the Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar passed away. His sudden demise, at the relatively young age of 65, a huge vacuum in this emerging project, left unanswered so many questions on how he would have carried forward this nascent journey.

It is well established that Ambedkar was seriously exploring various alternative ways of renouncing his Hindu faith for many decades before his formal conversion. From childhood, there were strong religious reformist influences in his life. As AnanyaVajpeyi (2012) recounts, "*Ambedkar named*



Kabir as one of his three gurus, along with the Buddha and Jotiba Phule. His father was a follower of both Ramanand, who was Kabir's guru, and Kabir himself" (p. 225) (1). But it was at the Yeola Conversion Conference in October 1935 in Nasik that he first made a public declaration of this intent:

"Unfortunately I was born a Hindu Untouchable. It was beyond my power to prevent that. But it is within my power to refuse to live within these humiliating conditions. Though I was born a Hindu, I solemnly assure you that I will not die as a Hindu (Government of Maharashtra." 2002, Vol. 18, Part 1, p. 430)

Ambedkar's biographer Sanghar

Ambedkar's biographer Sangharakshita (1986) graphically recounts Ambedkar's almost 50-year long engagement with Buddhism ever since aged 16, when he won a book on the Buddha as a prize in school, to his intense studies on the subject, his engagement with Buddhists from and travels to many Asian countries, as also his very serious study of many religious traditions as possible alternatives to Hinduism, and the various attempts to reform Hinduism from within. In the 1920s, he had started the journal *Bahishkrit Bharat*, from reading whose pages we can glean his relentless struggle to arrive at the right religion for the Dalits to convert to and we see how seriously he considered Christianity, Islam and Sikhism as alternatives. As Vajpeyi (2012) recounts:

"Ambedkar tested every big and small, old and new religion available to Indians, trawled the texts and tenets of Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians, and indeed made himself an entire career as a scholar of comparative religions alongside his enormously busy public life as a mass leader, a politician, and an intellectual." (p.209)

His determination to move out of the Hindu fold was a direct consequence of his life as a Dalit, with all the humiliations, deprivations, bigotry, prejudice, segregation, abuse and violence, that he, his family and his community suffered, his exhaustive historical and anthropological study of the unspeakable indignities suffered by the "Untouchables", but also through a frustration with the various attempts made by so many social reformers of the past, the failure of his own Kalaram temple entry satyagraha and the stance and work of Mahatma Gandhi and the Congress Party.

This is a well-rehearsed and oft-repeated story. For us it would suffice to recount Ambedkar's debate with Gandhi, so evocatively and faithfully captured in the pages of the *Harijan*. This makes it clear how Ambedkar arrived at his conclusion that it would be impossible for the Dalits to get justice within the Hindu fold. Ambedkar probingly asked Gandhi:

"Why do you restrict the movement to the removal of Untouchability only? Why not do away with the caste system altogether? If there is a difference between caste and Untouchability, is it not one only of degree?" (Harijan, 11 February, 1933, p.2)

Gandhi replied cunningly and hypocritically:

"Untouchability as it is practised today in Hinduism in my opinion, is a sin against God and man and is, therefore like a poison slowly eating into the very vitals of Hinduism. There are innumerable castes in India. They are a social institution and at one time they served a very useful purpose, as, perhaps, they are even doing now to a certain extent. . . There is nothing sinful about them. They retard the material progress of those who are labouring under them. They are no bar to the spiritual progress. The difference, therefore, between caste system and Untouchability is not one of degree, but of kind." (Harijan, 11 February, 1933, p.2)

As highly unsatisfactory an answer as can be imagined and Ambedkar's rebuke was characteristically sharp:

The outcaste is a by-product of the caste-system. There will be outcastes as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of the caste-system. (Harijan, 11 February, 1933, p.2)

There is a long discussion among Ambedkar scholars about why he finally chose to move to Buddhism. Many regard, and with good reason, that the proverbial last straw was the lack of support from the Prime Minister for the Hindu Code Bill, drafted in large measure by Ambedkar, which led to his resignation from the Nehru cabinet in September 1951, just a year after the country had adopted the "Ambedkar Constitution". Of course, there is equally strong evidence to indicate that much before this; Ambedkar's mind was largely made up about conversion to Buddhism. As Anand Teltumbde (2018) says

“Much before the formal declaration to embrace Buddhism, Ambedkar’s attraction to it was quite public. In 1948, Ambedkar republished P. Lakshmi Narasu’s Essence of Buddhism. In 1950, Ambedkar wrote his famous essay entitled ‘Buddha and the Future of His Religion’ in the journal Mahabodhi and indicated the need of a gospel to guide the new converts. The essay was a turning point for Dalits in so far as they now knew Ambedkar’s choice.”(2)

According to Ambedkar, the real objective of a religion should be the spiritual development of individuals. Personally, Ambedkar rated the spiritual aspect of religion to be more important than the existential aspect. For the sake of Dalits, he would emphasize the existential utility of religion. . . However, the choice of religion that Ambedkar made in 1956 was quite contrary to this existential consideration. It appears that his spiritual consideration eventually overwhelmed the existential one.

Ambedkar told his followers in a speech in Agra on the 18th of March, 1956, **“Without religion, our struggle will not survive”**. Nicolas Jaoul (2018) (3) recalls what Ambedkar said in a press conference in Nagpur on the eve of his conversion:

Answering the journalist who asked, “What about the special concessions ensured by the Constitution to the Untouchable class? They will be no more. What about that?”, Ambedkar reiterated that Dalits should become equal citizens rather than claim benefits that would perpetuate their traditional status as Untouchables —‘We will get all the concessions ensured for all citizens even after conversion. As of the question of special concessions, why do you worry about that? Whether you wish that we should remain Untouchables all the life to avail the special concessions given by the Constitution? We are striving to achieve Humanism.

Ambedkar’s Spiritual Buddha

Even willing to give up so many socio-economic benefits provided by the welfare state as per the provisions of the Constitution he himself drafted, it is abundantly clear then that for Ambedkar, the conversion to Buddhism was motivated by a deeper concern. It was a profoundly spiritual act with potentially revolutionary consequences for not only the Dalits but humanity, as a whole.

Meaningful politics in an unjust society comprises any endeavour to alter the balance of power in favour of the deprived and oppressed. How radical such an attempt is, turns on how far-reaching a challenge is mounted to these structures of power, how comprehensive, how universal and how enduring is the vision of transformation embedded in this politics. Do we get to experience freedom at the deepest level? Or do we continue to remain caught in the endless cycle of desire, fulfilment and lack -- that becomes an eternal source of bondage and unfreedom, even enslavement, more overpowering than any external servitude?

It is this striving that drew Ambedkar to the various religious traditions and finally Buddhism. As early as 1936, while making a blistering attack on the caste system in his classic work *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar clarified:

“I must not be understood to hold the opinion that there is no necessity for a religion. On the contrary I agree with Burke when he says that ‘True religion is the foundation of society, the basis on which all true Civil Government rests, and both their sanction. Indeed, I am so convinced of the necessity of religion that I feel I ought to tell you in outline what I regard as necessary items in this religious reform. . . you must give a new doctrinal basis to your religion—a basis that will be in consonance with liberty, equality and fraternity.” (24.1, 24.5)

He reiterated this view 20 years later:

For the religious system although today is unrelated to the secular system, yet is the foundation on which everything secular rests when the secular system cannot last very long unless it has got the sanction of the religion however remote it may be. (Ambedkar 1956b)

Lest there be any misunderstanding, let me hasten to clarify that Ambedkar is not here making a case for a theocratic state. His emphasis is on the fostering of values that would engender a humane society, based on loving kindness, an impeccable Buddhist virtue. The question he asked himself was: what would foster such a society, imbued with these values? And his clear answer was that this requires a process of inner transformation, without which all activism and all social engineering would come to nothing.

He was drawn to the religious traditions because the transformation they seek is more fundamental than the one sought by what one may call the more sectarian movements, each



undoubtedly invaluable and extremely challenging in themselves, but finally limited to transforming a specific structure of power, whether based on gender, class, caste, race, region or community. This also helps us understand Ambedkar's rejection of Marxism (which he considers very seriously) and what makes his spirituality so powerfully radical in political terms. Ambedkar's was a ceaseless struggle to arrive at a body of thought that would enable a transformation of the world of sorrow, not only for the Dalits but for all beings on Earth.¹² He was also eagerly committed to the spirit of scientific enquiry. He would persistently question any claim that he found to be humbug¹³. He was, therefore, drawn to both Marx and the Buddha. Indeed, he argues, citing extensively from the Buddha, that there was no fundamental disagreement between Marx and the Buddha on what Ambedkar regarded as the four essential elements of Marxism. But then Ambedkar (1956b) goes on to contrast the means advocated by them:

The means of bringing about Communism, which the Buddha propounded, were quite definite: the Pancha Silas, which address that part of the unhappiness of man that results from his own misconduct, the Noble Eight-Fold Path, which redresses that part of the misery which was the result of man's inequity towards man and the doctrine of Nibbana, which outlines the Asavas, or Hindrances in the way of the Eight-Fold Path.

The main hindrance is the delusion of self. So long as a man is wholly occupied with himself, chasing after every bauble that he vainly thinks will satisfy the cravings of his heart, there is no noble path for him. Only when his eyes have been opened to the fact that he is but a tiny part of a measureless whole, only when he begins to realise how impermanent a thing is his temporary individuality, can he even enter upon this narrow path."

For this we need the *Paramitas*, the virtues to be practiced in one's daily life. The first is *Khantior* forbearance, the essence of which is not to meet hatred by hatred. As if speaking directly to us as a messenger of love in these hate-filled times, Ambedkar says "*For hatred is not appeased by hatred. It is appeased only by forbearance.*" Having clearly explained the path of the Buddha, Ambedkar (1956b) goes on to ask: "*We must now consider whose means are more lasting. One has to choose between Government by force and Government by moral disposition*". And he argues, "*The Buddha's way was not to force people to do what they did not like to do although it was good for them. His way was to alter the disposition of men so that they would do voluntarily what they would not otherwise want to do.*"

Conclusion

When we examine the dominant values that have animated society in the 20th and 21st centuries, we find Ayn Rand's "virtue of selfishness", imposition of sameness in both McDonaldised global capitalism and totalitarian states (presciently anticipated by Herbert Marcuse), intensifying hatred for excluded minorities, the strident assertiveness of certainty of knowledge and the dominion over Nature (which spans both the Left and the Right).

Surely, the time is ripe for a serious reconsideration of the way forward. The spiritual tradition of the Buddha proposes a vision of a deeply inter-connected cosmos, where "**you are, therefore, I am**". Buddhism, like many other spiritual traditions, teaches that all life is inter-related. All things, mutually supportive and related, form a living cosmos, a single living whole. By engaging ourselves with others, our identity is developed, established and enhanced. As the 13th century Japanese Buddhist monk Nichiren wrote, '*If you light a lamp for another, your own way will be lit.*' We then also understand that it is impossible to build our own happiness on the unhappiness of others.

It is truly ironic that Ambedkarite activism has given rise to a "politics of identity" quite different from the one he would have wished for. Working for the *annihilation* of caste, what Ambedkar would have wanted is the assertion of an identity that affirmed the oneness of all existence, in recognition of its inter-dependence and inter-connectedness, beyond the separate self. Only on this basis would we be able to live a life animated by the key Buddhist (and universal spiritual) principles of *karuna* (bearing the suffering of others as one's own) and *upekkha* (cultivating the necessary detachment), without which it would become impossible for us to have the requisite energy to sustain the struggle for change, as also to bring it to a creative fruition. But there are huge possibilities of visualising change from different vantage points, of flows of knowledge, insight and power from multiple directions. We need a vision of transformation that threads all these potentialities together.



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