

B. R. AMBEDKAR AND RELIGIOUS CONVERSION: A PHILOSOPHICAL STUDY

Manisha Dutta Hazarika

Assistant professor,
Department of Philosophy
M. D. K. G. College,
Dibrugarh, Assam

Abstract

A great versatile genius, Dr .B. R Ambedkar, spent his whole life fighting against social discrimination, the system of Chaturvarna and the caste-system of Hinduism. He strongly believed that the society should be based on the principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity in order to ensure social harmony and social justice, so he tried to establish equality in the society by mass conversion to Buddhism which is better known as New-Buddhism. This paper tries to focus the most burning issue of the Indian social system which not only palpably visible in his time, but also becomes an important issue of today.

Keywords : untouchability , caste-system, liberty, equality, new-Buddhism

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was a great thinker, a born fighter, jurist, Dalit political leader and a Buddhist revivalist. He was the chief architect of the Indian constitution. Born into a poor untouchable ‘Mahar’ family, he was humiliated by his high-caste school-friends. He spent his whole life fighting against social discrimination, the system of Chaturvarna and the caste-system of Hinduism. He was a true social reformer and democrat as well as an advocate of the society which is based on the principles of natural justice, equality and classification according to aptitude, ability and profession. He considered caste- system in India as a major obstacle in the path of democracy in particular and in general for the society. He strongly believed that the society must be based on the principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity in order to ensure social harmony and social justice, so he tried to establish equality in the society by mass conversion to Buddhism which is better known as New- Buddhism.

Ambedkar was greatly influenced by Buddhist philosophy and western values. He quotes, “Philosophy of my life, has been materialized in three words- Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. This is not to be understood that I have borrowed this philosophy of life from the Political Revolution of France, I empirically tell you that I have not done that. The root of my philosophy lays not in politics but in Religion. My master Lord Buddha’s teachings lent me that philosophy which I have accepted.”(Naik 1)

Being a so called untouchable by birth, Ambedkar had to face and experience humiliations from his childhood. In his school days he was not permitted to drink water from the common source in the school. He was not even allowed to sit in the class along with his classmates. When he was a Barrister in Bombay, he was humiliated by his colleagues on the ground of untouchability. There are so many incidences which he had to suffer due to the practice of untouchability and caste-system. He believed that the existence of caste-system in India is due to the notion of inequality imposed by religions. It gives rise to social and cultural practices and prejudices. He thinks that if these social and cultural practices cease, then only the discrimination of caste-system in India could be annihilated.

According to Ambedkar, the Manu Script, the Bhagavad Gita, Sankara's Vedanta, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana and the Puranas are theses all post-Mauryan texts, serve as sources of inequality. Due to these, he rebelled against the Hindu society. He had to fight against the high-handedness of Hindus in Maharashtra for their right to drink water from public tank. Again he had to fight to secure the right to entry into Hindu temple in Nasik. He convinced that the Hindu religion had given birth to the curse of untouchability. He decided that though he was born a Hindu, but he would not die as a Hindu.

Ambedkar now in search for a new religion which is suitable for him and his people. Finally he showed his people the way to their salvation i.e. the way of the Buddha. He studied Dhamma for more than twenty years and chose Buddhism of his own volition. He realised that the centre of Dhamma is man which is based on morality. The aim of Dhamma is the welfare of mankind. He chose Buddhism as an alternative, because it gives three principles in combination- it teaches wisdom, compassion and equality. Buddhism is the perfect example of liberty, equality and fraternity. He said that the Hinduism is based on chaturvarna which is another name of inequality. In Hinduism there is only slavery for the depressed classes. He began to realize that it is Buddhism which is based on equality and universal brotherhood.

Ambedkar had published a series of books and articles in which he argued that Buddhism is the only way for the untouchables to gain equality. He began to develop a vision for his people to make them realise the importance of Buddhism. Finally he publicly converted on October 14, 1956 at Deekhabhoomi, Nagpur. He took the three refuges and the five precepts in a traditional manner with nearly 400,000 of his followers. Many converted people called themselves as 'Nava-Buddha' i.e., New Buddhists. Many Dalits use the term 'Ambedkarite Buddhism' which is popular as New Buddhism. He administered to his followers the twenty-two vows which he had prepared to ensure that his fellow beings renounce their old religion fully and become Buddhist.

Ambedkar accepted that the Buddha was centrally concerned with suffering and the end of suffering. But his set of sufferings include suffering due to human's own wrong-doing and suffering due to inequality to other humans. In his 'The Buddha and His Dhamma', Ambedkar reformulated the life and teachings of Buddha. According to him, the function of the Dhamma is of two fold- to purify one's mind and to reconstruct world. The purpose of Dhamma is to transform an individual into a Buddha and to transform the world into a Sangha. The aim of Dhamma is the creation of an ideal society based on liberty, equality and fraternity. He called this vision 'Navayana' or New Buddhism.

Ambedkar believed that the moral order does not depend on a creator God. The moral order may be good or bad which depends on human only. The Buddha discovered that the world

revolves due to karma. The state of Nirvana is a way of being and acting beyond the world where the law of karma is not operative. According to him, caste comes into being due to social practices and conventions which is a wrong view. The law of karma emphasizes personal responsibility and positive action. It does not support the idea that birth in a lower caste is the deserved results of one's past actions. He made many provisions to create the Dhamma as a living force in India. After his conversion, he wanted to constitute a political party, The Republican Party of India. According to him, the criterion for judging right or wrong is justice. It can be ensured when the society is based on the principle of liberty, equality and fraternity.

It was very unfortunate that Ambedkar died just after the great conversion movement in 1956. Most of his noble ideas also died with him. Ambedkar, being an untouchable was treated with hatred due to which he had to believe that the Hindu scriptures were responsible for the caste discrimination. So he decided to convert himself into Buddhism. But conversion cannot be the solution for caste-discrimination. Gandhi, who also fought for the untouchable did not see the caste division as curse. We should search for the solution of this problem within the existing framework by modifying and changing the defective elements. We have to change our mind set. In every religion the end is more or less the same. It is not the religion but the people's mind which is responsible for this problem. Every religion speaks of liberty, equality and fraternity. We are all the children of the same God and we are all brothers. We, the people of India must develop the feeling of brotherhood for each other. Only then the dream of Ambedkar will be fulfilled.

References:

- Ahir, D.C. *Buddhism in India*. New Delhi: Buddhist World Press . 2010 Print
Moon Vasant, Translated by Asha Samle, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, A-5 Green park, 2007. Print
Naik C.D. *Thoughts and Philosophy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar*: New Delhi Sarup & Sons. 2003. Print
Sankar Rao C.N. *Sociology of Indian Society*: New Delhi. S. Chand & Company Ltd. Ram Nagar, 2010 Print
Sengar Shailendra, *Caste, Class and Social Inequality in India*: Anmal Publications Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 2007. Print