

ENGAGED BUDDHISM IN INDIA: BUDDHIST APPROACH OF DR. B. R. AMBEDKAR TO SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY IN INDIA

by Manish T. Meshram*

ABSTRACT

While many people know of Buddhism as part of India's past, it may well be India's future. The Buddhist movement inspired by Dr. Ambedkar in the 1950s has taken root as an "engaged Buddhist" uprising among millions in the 21st century. Dr. Ambedkar, with the half of the million followers of him, took refuge under Buddhism on October 14th, 1956 at Nagpur. He popularized Buddhism to great extent in the masses of modern India. It was the first ever application of Buddhist doctrines at the social level in modern India. Undoubtedly, whenever the major events related to the history of Engaged Buddhism in India and the world in the modern time would be counted; the name of Dr. Ambedkar would be foremost of the names. His total commitment to the principles of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity was rooted in the philosophy of the Tathagata Buddha.

Dr. Ambedkar was one such warrior of the highest order whose entire life symbolized a struggle for establishing a just social order. He remained engaged, since the 1920s and then throughout his life, in diverse activities, all giving a constructive and positive dimension to the

*. Doctor, Assistant Professor, School of Buddhist Studies & Civilization, Gautam Buddha University, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh 201312, India.

philosophy of Buddha and, ultimately leading to the establishment of an egalitarian, humane and moral society. When viewed all these activities undertaken by him, in totality, it would reveal that his entire life symbolized a glorious illustration of the tallest practitioner of Engaged Buddhism in India.

I would like to discuss and express about the Ambedkar's conception of sustainable society was; no caste, no inequality; no superiority, no inferiority; all are equal. High ideals and not noble birth was essential. Dhamma i.e. liberty, Metta, righteousness, an instrument of Government is essential for society. So the ideal society as conceived by Dr. Ambedkar is not only a democratic humane society based on liberty, equality, and fraternity but also on universal humanism, morality, and well-being of all. The roots of this conception go deeper to the ideal life i.e. Dhamma.

1. INTRODUCTION

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was a great National leader who made an outstanding contribution towards making of the constitution of India. Dr. Ambedkar was a religious man but did not want hypocrisy in the name of religion. To him religion was morality and it should affect the life each individual his character, action, reactions likes and dislikes. He experiences the bitterness of caste system in Hindus & criticized it. He renounces Hinduism and embraced Buddhist as a religious solution to the problems of untouchables. Dr. Ambedkar rejected Islam, Sikhism and Christianity and preferred Buddhism because of two reasons. Firstly, Buddhism has its roots in the India soil and secondly, it is the religion of ethics, morality and learning which has no place for caste system. Dr. Ambedkar laid 22 vows for the people who wanted conversion to Buddhism. On 14th October 1956 Babasaheb embraced Buddhism with his followers, more than five lakh in member. He brought a great revolution in the life the depressed, suppressed and oppressed castes in India.

Dr. Ambedkar was a gentleman distinction, a great scholar, a brilliant author, as able statesman, an outstanding social reformer, a remarkable law-giver, a patriot in the true sense, a lovable friend, and a *Dhammaduta* par excellence. Multitalented, this devoted son of mother India, labored hard to remove the blot of 'Untouchability' from her face. A man of practical sense, this intellectual luminary

was, above all, a far-sighted religious leader. He was certainly the hero of the contemporary Buddhist renaissance in India. Moreover, in the annals of the world-wide revival of Buddhism in the mid-twentieth century, he stands out as a beacon-light for all times and climes. Besides, his wisdom and vision have made a lasting contribution to the social consciousness of humanity.

2. CONCEPT OF ENGAGED BUDDHISM AND SOCIALLY ENGAGED BUDDHISM

According to the Australian scholar Patrica Sherwood, "Socially Engaged Buddhism" is Buddhist practice that seeks to make a conscious contribution to the liberation of sentient beings including oneself as well as others from the suffering. This position has been categorically and elaborately expounded by the Thai reformer Sulak Sivaraksa who touched upon the essence of Buddhism and notes, "It means deep commitment and personal transformation to be help we must become more selfless and less selfish. To do this, we have to take more and more responsibility in society. This is the essence of Buddhism, from ancient time's right up to the present." (Patricia 2001, p.61-74).

The Socially Engaged Buddhism is a topic which has attracted worldwide attention. Because of its immense relevance in the contemporary world, the researcher proposes to develop insights into the authoritative texts and their interpretations centered on the concept in different perspectives. In the propose research, the concept of socially engaged Buddhism will be discussed with exclusive focus on Australia.

It seems that the term "Engaged Buddhism" was originally coined by the venerable Thich Nhat Hanh in 1963. Subsequently, the expanded term, "Socially Engaged Buddhism" became popular during the 1980s. The term "Socially Engaged Buddhism" essentially signifies an active involvement of Buddhist members in society and its problems. Those who are associated with this nascent movement attempt to actualize the ideals of wisdom and compassion which have long been rooted in the historical tradition of Buddhism. Based on the ethical and social teachings of traditional Buddhism engaged Buddhism tries to apply them to social life as also to social issues.

Any movement of “engaged Buddhist” is comprised of a wide range of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Inspired by the core values and ideals of Buddhism, they stand in perfect unison to lessen the suffering of the world, specifically by “engaging” (as opposed to renouncing) various social, political and economic institutions, structures and systems prevailing in the society.

Basically, engaged Buddhism is not just an answer to those opinionated scholars who depict Buddhism as a passive, other-worldly or escapist religion, but it also effective long-term solution to the problems and challenges of the contemporary society. Thus it can be stated that engaged Buddhism per se is not new to Buddhism, but it is instead the way Buddhist leaders have engaged themselves and are being engaged that is new and deserves clarification.

3. EVOLUTION OF INDIAN ENGAGED BUDDHISM

Dr. Ambedkar also put forth a thesis ‘Annihilation of Caste’, his magnum opus, that a political revolution was always preceded by a cultural revolution. After quoting examples from the world history, he gave some illustrations from India. He, thus, maintained that ‘the political revolution led by Chandragupta was preceded by the religious and social revolution of Buddha. The political revolution led by Shivaji was preceded by the religious and social reform brought about by the saints of Maharashtra. The political revolution of the Sikhs was preceded by the religious and social revolution led by Guru Nanak. These (illustrations) will show that the emancipation of the mind and the soul is necessary preliminary for the political expansion of the people’ (Government of Maharashtra, 1979, p.44).

Viewed in this perspective, I intend to argue that by embracing Buddhism and bringing back to its place of origin, Dr. Ambedkar sought to carry out in India a social and culture revolution, and make it the foundation of India’s new democratic social order as enshrined in the Constitution (Mungekar, 2009). But there is one more dimension to Dr. Ambedkar’s interpretation of Buddhism. It is well-acknowledged that Dr. Ambedkar interpreted Buddhism in the context of challenges facing the contemporary world (Government of India, 1992; Mungekar, 2007). His interpretation of Buddhism is so unconventional and non-traditional that some

scholars described it as 'Ambedkar Buddhism'. Buddha and His Dhamma, his magnum opus and a Gospel of Modern Buddhism is a testimony to this. A day before conversion, while speaking to the press people, he explained that he did not subscribe either to *Hinayana* or *Mahayana*. He described his concept of Buddhism as New Buddhism and called it *Navayana* (Queen, 2007, p.25). In terms of its essence that I shall narrating in the following pages, I would prefer to interpret the *Navayana* as 'Indian Engaged Buddhism.'

The term engaged Buddhism 'was coined in the 1960s by Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, to describe the struggle of his fellow- activist monks during the Vietnam, war, and 'offers a new interpretation of the ancient concept of 'liberation' (*Vimukti*). Thus, the emphasis of engaged Buddhism is no longer on personal goals associated with *nirvana* (meaning, 'inner peace and freedom') and *bodhi* ('enlightened mind'), but on the collective idea of *laukodaya* ('worldly awakening') that included individuals, communities, villages, and nation- not in future life or heavenly western paradise, but in this lifetime, in this world, on the ground' (Queen, Ibid, pp.13-14).

Queen has made mention of similar transformations in the Theravada countries of South and Southeast Asia (Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, and Burma); the Mahayana countries of Southeast and East Asia (Vietnam, Japan, Taiwan and Korea); and the Vajrayana states of the Himalayan region (Tibet, Ladakh, Sikkim and Bhutan). According to Queen, the Liberation Movement in India led by the newly converted Buddhist is glorious illustration of engaged Buddhism (Queen, Ibid, pp.14-15). In view of the above, engaged Buddhism would mean any academic, constructive or charitable activity or programme undertaken by Buddhist individual, or a group of Buddhist individuals or organization, economic, social, cultural or political, with a view to securing or furthering the welfare of the society. Fight against poverty, unemployment, and socio-economic inequalities, fight against casteism, fight against violence and war and undertaking all such activities that seek to strengthen in the society the virtues of compassion, tolerance, peace, friendship and unity.

4. DR. AMBEDKAR'S ENGAGED BUDDHISM: SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY IN INDIA

I have mentioned in the beginning that Dr. Ambedkar made announcement of leaving the Hindu fold in 13th October 1935 and formally embraced Buddhism in 14th October, 1956 at Nagpur. However, he became a Buddhist by conviction since the early part of his life. His total commitment to the principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity was rooted in the philosophy of Tathagat Buddha, which he explicitly mentioned at some later date in the following statement:

'Positively, my social philosophy may be said to be enshrined in three words: Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Let no one, however say that I have borrowed my philosophy from the French Revolution, I have not. My philosophy has roots in religion and not in political science. I have derived them from the teachings of my Master, the Buddha. In his philosophy, liberty and equality had place; but he added that unlimited liberty destroyed equality, and absolute equality left no room for liberty. In his philosophy, law had a place only as a safeguard against the breaches of liberty and equality; but he did not believe law can be a guarantee for breaches of liberty or he gave the highest place to fraternity as the only safeguard against the denial of liberty or equality or fraternity which was another name for brotherhood or humanity, which was again another name for religion' (Government of Maharashtra, 1991, p.503). It would be evident that when a society is not based on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, and the Hindu society was certainly not the one, it is only imperative but becomes obligatory for the believers in those principles to make sustained efforts to translate them in reality.

Dr Ambedkar was one such warrior of the highest order whose entire life symbolized a struggle for establishing the sustainable society. He remained engaged, since 1920s and then throughout his life, in diverse activities, all giving a constructive and positive dimension to the philosophy of Buddha and, ultimately leading to the establishment of an egalitarian, humane, moral and Sustainable society. When viewed all these activities undertaken by him, in totality, it would reveal that his entire life symbolizes a glorious illustration of the founder of Indian engaged Buddhism.

5. STRUGGLE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS OF THE UNTOUCHABLES (OUTCASTES SOCIETY)

Dr. Ambedkar formed the *Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha* (the Outcastes Welfare Association) in 1924. Obviously, its objective was to undertake various activities for the welfare of the untouchables. He, naturally, began his movement with the battle for establishing the basic human rights of the untouchables. Like many other denials and indignities, the untouchables had no access to drinking water even from the public wells and ponds, that were open to animals, let alone the privately-owned wells. Dr. Ambedkar, therefore, led his historic *satyagriha* to the *Chavadar* tank in town of Mahad in Raigad (then *Kolaba*) district of the state of Maharashtra on March 25, 1927, that was joined by thousands of his followers. He was greeted by angry upper-caste reactionaries with bricks and sticks, and stoutly protested and foiled his attempt in the first instance. He made yet another attempt within a few days and succeeded in accessing the water of tank. This time, he also burnt the *Manusmriti*, the famous Hindu scripture that sanctified the inhuman sufferings of untouchables and the *Shudras* in general.

The *Chavadar* tank *satyagriha* or Mahad became the turning point and milestone in the Ambedkarian Movement of social emancipation of the untouchables. Since then, thousands of Dr. Ambedkar's followers throng to Mahad, every year, and pay their respectful homage to their emancipator. After the *satyagriha* of Mahad, Dr. Ambedkar turned to the temple entry. The *Kalaram* (temple having the black idol of a Hindu deity Rama) at Nasik, Maharashtra was considered byer pious in that region and, therefore, as entry into that temple was very important. Dr. Ambedkar decided to enter the temple with thousand of his followers. However, on the day of *Satyagriha*, the reactionary Hindus, like on the occasion in Mahad, vehemently protested and foiled Dr. Ambedkar's attempt of the temple entry. Dr. Ambedkar later organized the Parvati temple *satyagriha* in Pune.

In this context, what needs to be emphasized is that unlike the *Chavadar* tank *satyagriha* of Mahad. Dr Ambedkar was least interested in temple entry for the religious purpose. He just wanted to establish the temple entry as a basic human right of the untouchables. He was provoking the Hindu and appealing to their

conscience. His question was: If the untouchables constituted an integral part of the Hindu society, then why did or should they not have the same human-civic rights on par with the rest of the Hindus? Not only did he attach the reactionary Hindu, but he also exposed the progressive Hindus who were the silent spectators towards his lone battle for establishing the basic human rights of the untouchables.

6. POLITICAL RIGHTS: AN INSTRUMENT OF SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY OR SOCIAL CHANGE

Since beginning, Dr Ambedkar looked upon political as a powerful instrument of social change. From such perspective, he argued in his famous thesis in 'Mr. Gandhi and the Emancipation of the Untouchables' that the problems of the untouchables were essentially political problems, and therefore, he was convinced that they must share political power (Government of Maharashtra, 1990). Dr. Ambedkar, therefore, formed the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in 1936 and fought the first provincial election in 1937 in the state of Maharashtra. The manifesto of the ILP was fully devoted to the problems and welfare of the industrial workers, peasants, women, untouchables and all down-trodden sections of the society. The programmes of the ILP were, therefore, based on issues such as wages, housing, civic amenities, health and education. The ILP's success in the election was stupendous, inasmuch as it won 14 seats, and what was even more striking, of 14 of its successful candidates, three belonged to the upper castes. Dr. Ambedkar had to wind up the ILP due to certain political compulsions. He formed the All India Scheduled Castes Federation, another political party, in 1946, though it did not register any success. But what is important was his emphasis on sharing political power as an instrument of social change. It was this political dimension of his movement in claiming that the untouchables constituted a separate element in India's national life, and therefore, they must have separate political representation that brought him in direct conflict with Gandhi.

7. A PIONEER OF LABOURS WELFARE PROGRAMMES

Dr, Ambedkar was member in the British Viceroy's Executive

Council during the period from 1942-1946. He was assigned the portfolio of Labour. During his tenure, he implemented such welfare programmes for the working classes and initiates such policies and legislation that practically covered all sectors of the economy and all aspects of labor. It would, therefore, be no exaggeration to say that Dr. Ambedkar laid the foundation of free India's Labour policy (Governemnt of Maharashtra 1991)

8. EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN

Like untouchables, his concern towards the emancipation of women is sell-known; his definition of a cultured society was based on status of women in the society. Women, too, occupied a low position in all socio-economic and cultural spheres of the Hindu society. As the Minister of Law of Independent India, he prepared the famous Hindu Code Bill seeking to give the Hindu women all rights on par with men, the right to inheritance of parental property being the most important amongst them. He was convinced that the right would end the economic bondage of women and give them a sense of independent identity. He was so much exercised and committed to the cause of the women folk and their empowerment that, when the government turned cold feet and was unable to see the legislation through, he unhesitatingly resigned from the Nehru Cabinet.

9. PEOPLES' EDUCATION SOCIETY: HIGHER EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY

One of the greatest and all-time revolutionary contributions of Dr. Ambedkar to the cause of the upliftment of the downtrodden sections was his decision to form the People' Education Society (PES) in 1945. Following Jotirao Phule, his mentor along with the Buddha and Kabir, he knew the important of education as an instrument of personal empowerment and social liberation or sustainable society. He himself was its gloriously illustration. Dr. Ambedkar, thus, started in 1946 the Siddhartha College of Art and Science. Since he knew that the students from the poor, socio-economically backward communities would not be able to pursue full-time higher education and they would have to earn and learn, he located the collage in the business and commercial heart of the city of Mumbai. The Siddhartha College, thus, became the first morning

college in India that enabled thousand of working students, both belonging to the depressed sections, including the present author and of the upper castes, to pursue higher education; otherwise, the doors of higher education to them would have permanently been closed. The PES started many colleges in Mumbai and other parts of Maharashtra, particularly the educationally backward Marathawads region and made a historic contribution to spreading higher education to the poor and disadvantages section of the society.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, along with an intellectual dimension of Buddhism leading the individual to the state of enlightenment, Dr. Ambedkar, throughout his life, gave Buddhism, a positive, social and constructive dimension in the form all sorts of programmes, actions and services that helped empower the downtrodden and took society to the stage of higher social welfare. This is the essence of Indian Engaged Buddhism. This is what the Buddha meant by *Bahujan Hitay, Bahujan Sukhay*. Therefore, it would be imperative for the Buddhists and particularly for the followers of Dr. Ambedkar to undertake all such charitable and constructive activities that would enhance the welfare of their fellow brothers and sister. To accomplish this goal, they must organize and unite. They must get rid of the shallow and sectarian consideration, and also overcome egoism. They must honestly and genuinely embrace the philosophy of Buddha and surrender to the historic, legendary and epoch-making legacy of Dr. Ambedkar.

References

Government of Maharashtra. (1979) *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Vol.1, Education Department.

... 1990, Vol, 9.

... 1991, Vol,10.

... 1992, Vol.11.

Mungekar, B.L.ed. (2009) *Buddhism and the 21st Century, the Commemoration volume of the 255th Anniversary of the Mahanirvana of Lord Buddha*, Nava Nalanda Mahavihara.

Mungekar, B.L. & Rathore Akash Singh, ed. (2007) *Buddhism and the Contemporary World: An Ambedkarian Perspective*, Dr. Ambedkar Institute of Social and Economic change.

Patricia Sherwood. (2001) *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, V.8, Edith Cowan University, 61-74

Queen, Christopher. (2007) *Buddhism and World Order: A Turning point for Humanity*.

Bibliography

Ambedkar, B.R. (1997) *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. Napur, Buddha Bhoomi Publication.

Burton, David. (2004) *Buddhism, Knowledge, and Liberation: A Philosophical Analysis of Suffering*. England, Burlington.

Chang, Garma C.C., ed. (1991) *A Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras: Selections From the Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra*. Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass.

Gombrich, Richard. (2006) *Theravada Buddhism*. London, Routledge.

Harvey, Peter. (1990) *Introduction to Buddhism*. Cambridge University Press.

Narada, Mahathera. (1992) *A Manual of Buddhism*. Kuala Lumpur. Malaysia, Buddhist Missionary Society.

