



A Study of Ambedkar and the Ambedkarite Buddhist Movement in India

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Abstract:

This article is a study of Ambedkar's Neo-Buddhism and its movement after his death. It started because of injustice, inequality and liberality or against "Untouchables" that had been periodically exercised by the high castes of India. The objective: (1) to study life and social philosophy of Ambedkar in Indian context (2) to study the neo-Buddhist Religious movement in India (3) to study the evaluation of the Neo-Buddhist movement in India. The objectives based on the research: Ambedkar's social philosophical theories gave a tremendous support in the development of the Neo-Buddhists social development; they have got freedom of speech, freedom of thinking, freedom of religious practice and had to achieve opportunities from the Government as like others religions. They have right to enter any Hindus temple to visit importantly; and getting advantage in spiritually, educationally including Buddhism, with modern IT system. At the Present time, Neo-Buddhists are very actively working with socially engaged Buddhism.

1.1 Background and Significance of the Problem

The 'caste prejudice', is a great problem of India the entire Social system, and so early times too. This was called 'catuvanna': Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. But Ambedkar was born out of Caste. In accordance, the Indian social system, out of Caste never gets any privileges, from the State. So, Ambedkar and his community had been betrayed, deprived and neglected, from any kind of privileges from the State. This was the problem of Ambedkar and his community and seeking liberation such as mode of social system, such as, through parliamentary change, constitutional change, but these kinds of model was nothing, at the last, he choice the Buddhist liberative model which is helped him to change his religious Identity and Ambedkar successful. It was called "Neo-Buddhism". It was emerged as a dynamic Buddhist movement, particularly for the "Depressed Classes" or "Backward Classes" or "Untouchables. Dr. Ambedkar wanted Untouchables to be recognized as 'minority' such as: Muslims and Sikhs, but Gandhi had refused it.¹

Indian historically the religious background of the Buddhism in India has been the concept of more than 2500 years old. The founder was the Prince Siddhattha Gautama, who became a Buddha. Ambedkar's Buddhist movement was the rejection 'Three Truths of the 'Four Noble Truths', he accepted the 'Noble Eightfold Path' which is the last truth of the 'Four Truths'.²

The Caste problem was very chronic disease for the whole societies in India, and the historic person Ambedkar who is from the lowest strata of the Hindu society. He was intellectual persons to bring a social change in India, to break down the caste system and to establish fully democratic of basic human rights principles. When he understood without religion changing his communities never get any freedom, so he was to take refuge the Buddha and Dhamma but not Sangha. It is the modern version of the Neo-Buddhist movement.

¹ Basil Fernando, **Demoralization and Hope: A Comparative Study of the Ideas of N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872), Denmark and B.R. Ambedkar (1881-1956), in India**, (Hong Kong: Asian Human Rights Commission, 2000), p. 105.

² Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, **Writings and Speeches**, Vol.II, (India, Maharashtra: Education Department Government of Maharashtra, 1957-1992), pp. 120-131.



The Life and the Social Philosophy of Ambedkar

Dr. Ambedkar is a prominent figure in the history of Indian. His philosophy and teaching were based on the development his community from the injustice of socio-economic and political rights in India. He was born on 14 April 1891 and died in December 6, 1956. His father was a Subeder Major in the government military service, and it was a high Rank in the military service in India. So Ambedkar got all the opportunities from the state Government through his father, such as to go schools, who was from the outcaste community? His passed matriculation in 1907 and B.A. in 1912 with English, Politics, Economics and Persian and M.A 1915, his topic “Ancient Indian Commerce”. He finished PhD degree, with “A Historic and Analytical Study”³ In June 1916. He finished the D.Sc, his thesis was problem of a Rupee⁴, at the age of 32.

Ambedkar’s social ideology is three fundamental things: 1) liberty or freedom, 2) equality, 3) fraternity. First of all, he had to fight with the Hindus to gain political power and human rights in India. Ambedkar openly declared to the public, I was born as a Hindu, but I would not die as a Hindu⁵. Basically Ambedkar was looking at the outcastes never got any privileges, opportunities from the State, but instead they were oppressed, tortured, being slaved for the high castes people.

Dr. Ambedkar’s social ideology arose with the root of his social philosophy was not about in politics but “in religion concerned, because, to get facilitate the social revolution in India”.⁶ The social ideology could give freedom and equality. Dr. Ambedkar’s social ideology was mainly concerned on how Untouchables would get similar status under Indian caste system. He understood his community would not get liberty, equality, and fraternity from the Hindu social system without to reject the Hinduism. He wanted a suitable religion to convert which was Neo-Buddhism.

The Constitution Assembly of Independent India appointed a Drafting Committee with Dr. Ambedkar as its Chairman to draft the Constitution of India. In February 1948, Dr. Ambedkar abolished untouchability in all forms. The mass conversion of Dalit class to Buddhism would call a historic of social revolution of India.

Basically, the origin of the Indian **social system** the Vedic Aryans knew no caste system and they divided themselves for different occupations. Those who took to learning were called Brahmins, those who undertook governance were classified as Kshatriyas, those who resorted to trade were termed Vaishyas, and those who served the foregoing classes was known as Sudras. The Untouchables form the lowest strata of Hindu society and were condemned as Untouchables by the caste Hindus through centuries.

There were huge discriminations between higher caste Hindus and outcastes Hindus: Prohibited eats, Marrying with other castes members, separate glasses, seating arrangements for Dalits in village tea stalls, and in restaurants, Segregation seating and food in village functions and festivals, prohibited: entering into village temples, holding umbrellas in front of dominant caste members, entering dominant caste homes, riding a bicycle inside the village, using common village path, separate burial grounds, resources (wells, ponds, temples.), hoisting the national flag during Independence or Republic days, etc.

³ K. David Pandyan, op.cit, p. 57.

⁴ K. David Pandyan, op.cit, p. 58.

⁵ Sangharakshita, **Ambedkar and Buddhism**, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 1986), p. 11.

⁶ Kuber W. N., **Dr. Ambedkar: A Critical Study**, (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1973), p. 289.



With regard to Buddhism, just after the declaration by Ambedkar to convert into Buddhism, the secretary of the Buddhist Maha Bodhi Society said: You with your community are most cordially welcome to embrace Buddhism.⁷ Most probably Ambedkar was concerned of the three-fold principles for purification of “Body, Speech and Mind”,⁸ and three principles: Pragna (wisdom), Karuna (compassion), and Samatha (equality), which teaches all human beings need for a ‘good and happy life’.

In the Indian historical context, the Social revolution took place against the caste system by the Buddha at his time was very much successful, During the time, the social condition was turned into more favorable and suitable, but his death, the Indian Social Condition became worse again. After Ambedkar was succeeded in some extent to bring social revolution for the untouchables or outcaste. In order to bring social equality to the entire people India, Ambedkar became one of the first social reformers for his excellent academic achievements and his perfect personalities. He advised and suggested to his communities of untouchables to be a better educated in order to fight for the democracy, social justice and political right, freedom.

Buddhism does not accept the social discrimination rather it emphasizes the unity among societies for harmony and prosperity of the suffering humanity. The Buddha says: “Go monks, for the happiness of the world, teach the Dhamma good in the beginning, good in the middle and good in the end, but do not go two of you on the same way.”⁹ This shows that the Buddha has laid much emphasis on the members of society and their welfare. Therefore, the old Buddhist monasteries became spiritual and culture learning centers.

The Sigalovada Sutta explains the family and social relationships. The Kutadanta Sutta explains the way of developing a country with proper planning and the nature of socio-economic progress. The Chakkavattisihanada Sutta explains the poverty, revolution, poverty-related crimes and the chaotic situation of a country and the reasons for those social ills.¹⁰ In the Agganna Sutta¹¹ we find a theory of the origin of social classes.

The Pali term “Ehipassiko”¹² constitutes an open invitation to all to come and see, or open to all, because there is nothing mythical or mysterious. The Buddha Himself declared: “Do not accept what I say. Just as purity of gold by melting. There are three foundational concepts existence: impermanence (anicca); unsatisfactoriness (dukkha); and selflessness (anatta). All things arise and pass away,

The Ambedkarte Neo-Buddhist Movements and Buddhism in India

⁷ Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King, **Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia**, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 51.

⁸ Ibid., p. 93.

⁹ “*Caratha bhikkhave carikam bahujanahitaya bahujanasukhaya lokanukampaya atthaya hitaya sukhaya devamanussanam. Ma ekena dve agamittha. Desetha bhikkhave dhammam adikalyanam majjhekalyanam pariyoanakalyanam satham savyanjanam kevalaparipunnam parisuddham brahmacariyam pakasetha.*” Hermann Oldenberg, **The Vinaya Pitakam** (The Mahavagga), Vol. I, (London: PTS, 1964), p. 21.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 395-405.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 407-415.

¹² Rhys Davids T.W., William Stede, **Pali-English Dictionary**, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1993-1997), p. 162; Buddhadatta Mahathera A. P., **Concise Pali-English Dictionary**, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1957-1997), p. 69. “*Ehi passa imam dhammam ti evam pavattam ehi-passa-vidham arahati ti.*” Vism. 216.



The Ambedkarite Buddhist movement is sociological significance; and a “status-seeking movement.”¹³ The untouchable started the struggle movement under the dynamic Buddhist movement, which is called ‘Neo-Buddhist movement’, which would, distinct from other Buddhist movement in the world.

Ambedkar saw the entire teaching of the Buddha as sociological significance. The Buddha strongly criticized the Indian social system, caste system and social structure. Ambedkar was also heavily criticized the social structure of India. The ideology of both the Buddha and Ambedkar can be different ways: first one the social context of India, and second one the religious context both non-Buddhist religious and the traditional Buddhism.

It is important to put a quote by Ambedkar: “If there is any name which is known, popular outside of India, that name of the Buddha.”¹⁴ So he only accepted Buddhism, after conversion to Buddhism, asked by B.B.C., why you had chosen Buddhism. Then Dr. Ambedkar replied that Buddhism has three principles: wisdom, compassion and equality, which are being good life, happiness. Those are “Ahimsa (non-violence), Social freedom, intellectual freedom, economic freedom, and Equality between man and woman.”¹⁵

Actually, Ambedkar Buddhist movement was based on the solution of Indian caste system and his intention to leave Hinduism and interested in Buddhism. A large number of supporters he converted on October 14, 1956 in Nagpur with three Refuge and Five Precepts from a Buddhist monk. Ambedkar gave his followers conviction in the Dhamma Diksha at Nagpur, which contains twenty-two vows after Three Jewels and Five Precepts. “Buddhism would not pose a threat to the concept of a predominant Hindus in India, which Islam or Christianity do.

Actually, the Buddhism in daily life practice: karma, rebirth, dharma, meditation, spirituality, politics, individuality and social action. On the one hand, the Neo-Buddhist practice can differ from each other. “They prayed to all gods, including Hindu deities. The Dalit Buddhist movement is a “symbol of identity transformation”¹⁶ rather than a true religious conversion. The devotees believe heart-fully by monk’s speech and chant, because according Buddhist societies law monks are placed top in leadership and action. On the contrary, the Neo-Buddhist does not wait for the Bhikkhu any ceremonies because “the responsibility of the Bhikkhu is conversion”¹⁷ It shows that the monastic community in the Buddha’s time had engaged in the social, political, economics.

The Dalit Buddhist movement is the most influential in the present society of India and popular in the Contemporary societies of the world.¹⁸ They getting helped from the Western Buddhist Order and Buddhist leaders from Japan “to build monasteries, Buddhist institutions, they campaign to get freed Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya from Hindu control.”¹⁹

The germs of Ambedkar: “the development of so-called untouchable’s socio-religious in particular and other societies in India. But the Buddha’s teachings continue: the Five Precepts, Ten Paramattas, Yet, Ambedkar was not interested in traditional approach of any Buddhist teaching “to remove injustice and inhumanity,” rather than nirvana.”²⁰

¹³ Singh N.K., **Contemporary Indian Buddhism: Tradition and Transformation**, (New Delhi: Global Vision Publishing House, 2008), p. 54.

¹⁴ International Network of Engaged Buddhists, *Radical Conservatism: Buddhism in the Contemporary World*, (Bangkok: The Sathirakoses-Nagapradipa Foundation, 1990), p.349

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*



His perception on Buddhism was dynamic approach more socialization in order to put Buddhism. For example; he criticized the Order of the Sangha, because they are prohibited to engage in social activities rather staying in the monastic boundary. He insisted the monks should help the societies without any barrier from the movement. The Neo-Buddhists and others depressed class have turned on to the development: “constantly has increased the Buddha’s path”²¹, because of it is a code of morality to Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.”

The Impacts of the Neo-Buddhists Movement in India

It is historical perspectives, his social philosophy and religious movement was to abolish Indian caste system. Actually, Buddhism would not harm the tradition and culture and history of India but to bring the greatest benefit for the country by embracing Buddhism which has been a part and parcel of Bharatiya culture.”²² The Neo-Buddhist movement came into existence to achieve recognizable status than other religions, “by their converts to Buddhism”²³ such as “Socially, political, religious and cultural”²⁴.

Ambedkar Buddhist movement has been reformed and progressive ways in the society by taking five precepts. To be creating peace, for all human being with faithfully holding the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha and human liberation.”²⁵ Ambedkar had delivered to the lay people the important teaching of the Buddha with regard to the body, speech and mind for cultivating skillful mental and to be faith of the Buddha image, his birth, enlightenment and parinibbana, every full-moon day of May in every year. Neo-Buddhist movement wasn’t a Theravada or Mahayana Buddhism, but, Neo-Buddhism is a modern revival by Ambedkar.

According to fundamental rights of human, the Education is one of them. So everybody have right to learn in the government or private educational institutions. He knew that education is important to breakdown and fundamentally change the social system. According to 1971 census “the neo-Buddhists have progress in education and their literacy become equal of the Brahmins and all other castes in India.”²⁶

Ambedkar was a keen student of economics. He wrote three scholarly books on economics: (1) Administration and Finance of the East India Company, (2) The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India, and (3) The Problem of the Rupee: Its Origin and Its Solution. Ambedkar concentrated three major things 1) Land reforms, 2) Currency problems, and 3) Problems of finance. The economic progress of the *Mahars* was one of the main concerns of *Ambedkar*, because without economics prosperity a person cannot sustain level in the society. So, the economic development should have the opportunity from the Government in the trades and the businesses.

Social dimension of *Ambedkar* Buddhist movement was to change in social status. Ambedkar Buddhist movement has brought some development in the societies of India, particularly in the lowest strata of the people. Dr. *Ambedkar* said: I have based my philosophy on Buddhist teachings. The main parts of my philosophy are freedom and equality.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Uttara Shastree, **Religious Converts in India**, (New Delhi: Mittal Publication, 1996), p. 24.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 23.

²⁵ Lokamitra, **Buddhism: Seeds of Social Transformation**, http://www.lifepositive.com/Spirit/Buddhism/Seeds_of_social_transformation102005.asp, retrieve on: November 18, 2010.

²⁶ Ibid.,p. 17.



He had submitted a draft for the future constitution for the independent India. It was later as “States and Minorities” For The aim of his mission was to arouse in men and women for right relations. Example “the Neo-Buddhists have achieved better social condition in India by undertaking Buddhist Morality.”²⁷ As Ambedkar’s main objective was to reform the entire Indian social system, Neo-Buddhists got social status, so the answer is ‘yes’.

The political rights to all people are provided the basic human rights principles: such as place to live, food for survival of life, cloths, medication, and education. The term of democracy is the human knowledge and understanding which can provide human equally. For example: “the concept of democracy is economic efficiency,”²⁸ the social equality in Buddhism. The Cullakammavibhanga Sutta are:²⁹

- (1) One person is ugly, or low of social status;
- (2) Another person is also ugly, but opulent;
- (3) Still another person may be beautiful but impoverished, and of low social status;
- (4) Yet, another person may possess everything (beauty, wealth, high social position, etc.).

The Buddha had never classified on social, religious of the people, but he emphasized for mutual co-operation, helping each other and making good environment for living.

5.1 Conclusion

The Neo-Buddhist movement of India was called Dr. Ambedkar Buddhist movement. The Buddhists monk from Arakan and Ceylon, Anagarika Dharmapala in India Bodh Gaya and later on by Dr. Ambedkar. Dr. Ambedkar was the last one who is a reformist under the social context of Buddhism. Knowledge and education are the backbone of the nation. Oppress, depress, torture, deprive and neglect is not the human integration toward other humans.

He also raised the gender issues among men and women and gave equal status and freedom. Freedom of living in a sustainable and sufficient ways of life, getting all men and women better education, economics development, medication, lands rights, exercise of religious freedom, women’s freedom, freedom of speech, freedom of political rights. The latest Ambedkar’s liberative model can be called as Buddhist liberative model, because he found the three basic things there, such as, equality, liberty and fraternity.

The Buddha had never pointed out, that persons are Buddhists, and these persons are Hindus and so on, because he had no intention to divide the people into different designations, This was very clear that after religious identity change. The untouchables converted to Buddhism’ they got

²⁷ Pravin Bhalesain, **Buddhist Ethics and Social Development**, Academic Papers Presented at the International Association of Buddhist Universities (IABU) Conference on “**Buddhism and Ethics**”, Symposium Volume, held in conjunction with the 1st IABU Summit at Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University Main Campus Wang Noi, Ayutthaya, Thailand, 13-15 September 2008, (Ayutthaya: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2008), pp. 558-559.

²⁸ Mohapatra, P. K., **Social Justice: Philosophical Perspectives**, (New Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 1999), p. 77.

²⁹ Horner I.B., **The Middle Length Sayings** (Majjhima-Nikaya), Vol. III, trans, (London: PTS, 1967), pp. 248-253.



Buddhist identity, so, they got equality, freedom and fraternity as like other religious communities in India.

Ambedkarite's Buddhist movement is such as in the religious dimension, in the educational dimension, in the economical dimension, in the social dimension and in the political dimension. As he was a Hindu by birth but he did not hesitate to convert to Buddhism. Already Ambattha, Sonadanta, Upali have converted and to be entered the Order of the Sangha.

Suggestions

1. The benefits of the researcher: (i) knew further information about the Neo-Buddhist movement; (ii) the Neo-Buddhists were socially more advanced than before; (iii) religious conversion to Buddhism gave them to exercise religious freedom; (iv) there has been tremendous impact that can be seen: politically, socially, culturally, economically, educationally, they got positive achievement.

Suggestion for a future researcher: A case study of the modern development of Neo-Buddhism in India. The structure would be such: community of monks, observance: Full-moon day, funeral rites, interaction of lay Buddhist community with Sangha, Here is important a comparison analysis: Theravada, Mahayana. Should be focus on the modern development of Neo-Buddhist activities.

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