



AMBEDKAR'S PERCEPTION ON RELIGION AND SOCIETY IN BUDDHISM

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Abstract

A people and their religion must be judged by social standards based on social ethics.

-B. R. Ambedkar

For Dr. Ambedkar, Philosophy is no purely theoretic matter. It has practical potentialities. Philosophy has its roots in the problems of life and whatever theories philosophy propounds must return to society as instruments of reconstructing society. It is not enough to know. Those who know must endeavor to fulfill.

In the moral order of his ideal society, Dr. Ambedkar emphasizes the collective responsibility of individuals for moral actions or duties. For an individual's action is not merely a means for his own good, but it also affects the actions of others. Thus, man is responsible for his own individual welfare as well as for social progress materially and spiritually. This forms one of the main features of his philosophy of Social Humanism. The religious aspect of Social Humanism also makes an attempt to stabilize human society on deeper spiritual foundations. Ambedkar's approach to religion is ethical, social and secular. According to him, the moral order in the universe is not sustained by God. It is maintained and carried on by man's Karmas. Man occupies the highest place in the cosmos, in which all things are relative. There is nothing absolute. Everything related to man and society. This paper will discuss about the concept of man in Buddhism and Dr. Ambedkar's ideas regarding Karma and Ahimsa, Moral order and Social ethics, Dhamma and the spiritual values in the light of Buddhism.

Key words: Society, Religion, Moral order, Dhamma, Karma, Ahimsa.

Concept of Man in Buddhism

The purpose of Buddha's Dhamma is to 'reconstruct the world'. This involves the all round growth of the individual and the development and harmony of social life. It does not require the postulation of the existence of the soul and its communion with God. This leads Ambedkar to sum up the essence of Buddhism



in the relation of man to society. It does not mean that he has under-rated the rational nature of man in Buddhism. His references to man, as he actually finds him, are not only placed in the framework of theories concerning the soul and God, but also in the context of Morality and Nature; thus including both secular and realistic elements.

The Buddhist conception of man is, from the beginning to the end, anthropocentric rather than theocentric. From the theocentric point of view, it is quite distinct from the conceptions of man in Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. The Hindu view of man is based on the individual soul and the unity of Brahma. The Islamic conception cannot be conceived without the mercy and immateriality of Allah. In Islam, man is a spark of Light or an emanation from the effluence of God-head, where as Christianity holds that man is a creature, made in the image of God. He is an 'original sinner' and his redemption lies through Christ, or through recognizing Jesus, the son of God. The Buddhist conception, on the other hand, works without the mechanism of soul and God. The Buddha's doctrine of soul is called 'An-atta', no soul. Man is one, who has no eternal soul. Buddhism, thus, differs from other theistic religions.

Dr. Ambedkar holds that religion, based on the concept of soul, is based on 'speculation'. For the soul is 'unknown' and 'unseen'. He says that the thing that exists is not the soul, but the 'mind', and 'mind' is quite different from the soul. Belief in a soul only ends in creating 'superstition' and 'priesthood'; rather it is 'unprofitable'. "For not only does it create a priesthood, not only is it the origin of all superstition, but it gives the priesthood complete control over man from birth to death".¹

As regards the Buddha's views on the existence of the soul, there are different opinions:

- (a) That the Buddha did not express any definite opinion on the existence of the soul;
- (b) That he did not repudiate the theory of the existence of the soul; and
- (c) That he was always dodging the issue.

These statements, Dr. Ambedkar thinks, are quite incorrect. He observes that, to Mahali, the Buddha did tell in most positive terms that there is no such thing, as a soul. Therefore, his theory of the soul is called 'An-atta' i.e., 'non-soul'² – in short, "the Buddha was known as the An-atta-vadi, or the teacher of impersonality".³

Moreover, the Buddha's theory against the existence of the soul as a separate entity, Ambedkar says, is called 'Nama Rupa'. It is the result of the application of the 'Vibhaja' test, of sharp, rigorous analysis, of the constituent elements of 'Sentient Being' otherwise called 'Human Personality'.⁴

Nama Rupa is a collective name for Sentient Being and, according to the Buddha's analysis, a Sentient Being is a compound thing consisting of certain



‘physical elements’ and certain ‘mental elements’. They are called ‘Khandas’. The Rupa Khanda, primarily, consists of the ‘physical elements’ such as ‘earth’, ‘water’, ‘fire’ and ‘air’, which constitute the Body or Rupa. Besides Rupa Khanda, there is such a thing as ‘Nama Khanda’, which goes to make up a Sentient Being. Rupa Khanda and Nama Khanda, both form the structure of human personality in its empirical sense.

This Nama Khanda is called ‘consciousness’ or ‘vinnana’. According to Ambedkar, this Nama Khanda includes three mental elements:

- (i) “‘Vedana’ (sensation springing from contact of the six senses—the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body (organ of touch) and mind, with the world) i.e., momentary emotional states.
- (ii) Sanna (perception) i.e., the conceptions and abstractions.
- (iii) Sankhara (states of mind) i.e., the dispositions, inclinations and volitions.”⁵

He regards consciousness as the centre of a sentient being, though it is sometimes spoken of, along with the three other mental states, as being one of them. He agrees with a modern psychologist, who says that consciousness is the mainspring from which other psychological phenomena arise. He differs from the Behaviourists, who under-rate or eliminate the role of consciousness in man’s reaction to his environment. Man in Buddhism, in his complete nature, is a complex of Khandas, only in thought can he be separated into Body (Rupa) and Mind (Nama).⁶

How is consciousness produced? Dr. Ambedkar holds it true that consciousness arises with birth and dies with death; at the same time, can it be said that consciousness is the result of the combination of the four physical elements? He observes, the Buddha’s answer was not that “the co-existence or aggregation of the physical elements produces consciousness”. What the Buddha said was that “wherever there was rupa or kaya, there was consciousness accompanying it”. Once consciousness arises, man becomes a sentient being.⁷ Consciousness is, therefore, the chief thing in the Buddhist conception of man.

Dr. Ambedkar says that consciousness is ‘cognitive’, ‘emotional’ and ‘volitional’:

- (a) It is cognitive, when it gives knowledge, information, as appreciating or apprehending, whether it is appreciation of internal facts or of external things and events.
- (b) It is emotional, when it exists in certain subjective states, characterized by either pleasurable or painful traits; emotional consciousness means dominance of feeling.
- (c) Consciousness, in its volitional stage, makes a being exert him for the attainment of some end. Volitional Consciousness means what we call will or activity.⁸



Obviously, Dr. Ambedkar believes that all the functions of a sentient being are performed by the sentient being 'though' and as a 'result' of Consciousness. He says that no function is left to be performed by the soul; all functions assigned to the soul are performed by Consciousness; hence, there remains no necessity to believe in the existence of soul.⁹ This is the Buddhist conceptions of man without soul, more accurately, without a 'permanent' or an 'eternal' soul.

There is no doubt that Dr. Ambedkar does not feel it necessary to postulate the existence of any substance, any abiding individual self or any soul. It does not mean that all thoughts and things do not exist. Indeed, they exist, yet they do not have a substratum or a permanent essence in themselves. The learned Doctor believes in the dynamic character of man in Buddhism and that dynamic character, he tells us, is best described by the formula, "being is becoming".¹⁰ Thus, as also Prof. Takakusu observes, "It is unreasonable to seek an unchanging essence in an all changing being",¹¹ rather every being is a "stage of dynamic becoming".¹² This is possible, because all human beings are always changing, always growing.

Death and After

What happens after death is an important question. There are two different views—Eternalistic and Annihilationistic. The former view affirms that the soul knows no death; therefore, "life is eternal". It is, indeed, renewed by 'rebirth'. The thesis of the Annihilationists is summed up in one word, "Ucchedvad", which means that death is the end of everything. There is, in fact, nothing left after death.

As for the Buddha, Dr. Ambedkar affirms, he was not an 'eternalist'. He did not believe in the existence of the soul, the Buddha would naturally be expected to be an 'annihilationist'. The learned Doctor asserts that the Buddha himself complained in the 'Alagaddupamm-Sutta' that he was called an 'annihilationist', when as a matter of fact, he was called an 'annihilationist', when as a matter of fact, he was not.¹³ This raises a serious question: Did the Buddha believe in 'rebirth'?

The Buddha was not an eternalist; he was also not an annihilationist, did the Buddha believe in rebirth? This raises a serious 'dilemma'. In order to answer, accurately-Ambedkar splits this question into two parts: (i) Rebirth of What and (ii) Rebirth of Whom? This will make a clear distinction between rebirth and transmigration, and Ambedkar believes in rebirth, but not in transmigration.

Rebirth of What?

Dr. Ambedkar observes that, to the Buddha, there are four elements of Existence- (i) Earth; (ii) Water; (iii) Fire; and (iv) Air, which go to compose the body.¹⁴ When the human body dies, these four elements do not die; they join the mass of



similar elements floating in space. Again, when the four elements from this floating mass join together, a new birth takes place. The four elements need not be and are not necessarily from the same body which is dead; somehow, they may be drawn from different dead bodies. Thus, according to Ambedkar, the body dies, but "the elements are ever living"; only in this kind of rebirth must the Buddha have believed.¹⁵

Rebirth of Whom?

Some religions hold that the same soul of the same body takes new birth in another body and is liable to be placed under the position, which the same man deserves in accordance with his deeds, done in his past or former life. This is known as transmigration. Ambedkar says that the Buddha did not believe in this thesis; and his answer regarding the regeneration of the same dead person, in his next birth, is that it is quite impossible. It depends upon the nature of the meeting of four physical elements in what way they may be combined to form a new body. Ambedkar believes that there is, indeed, rebirth, but not the rebirth of the same dead person, i.e., transmigration. If the same elements of the same dead body combine in a new birth, it is a 'chance' and not 'necessity'. There is no rebirth of the same soul, as other theistic religious theories believe.¹⁶

Moreover, Dr. Ambedkar tells us, when the body dies, it ceases to produce 'energy', and whatever energy escapes from the body joins the general mass of energy playing about in the universe³. He says that 'annihilation' has a two-fold aspect: it means - (i) cessation of production of energy and (ii) a new addition to the stock of general floating mass of energy.

From the standpoint of this two-fold aspect of annihilation, Ambedkar thinks that the Buddha was not an absolute annihilationist. Definitely, he was an annihilationist so far as the soul is concerned, but he was not an annihilationist so far as matter is concerned. It means that the Buddha, according to Ambedkar, believed in the 'generation' of matter and not in the rebirth of the soul, viz., transmigration.¹⁷ indeed, in this thought, Ambedkar firmly believes, there is no contradiction; there can be rebirth, although there is no transmigration.

It is only in this sense that "the Buddha could be said to have believed in rebirth". Modern science affirms that "energy is never lost". Ambedkar says that annihilation, in the sense that after death nothing is left would be contrary to science; for it would mean that energy is not in constant in 'volume'. Only in the above way could the dilemma be solved.¹⁸

The Buddhist conception of a man, as Ambedkar thinks of, is that of a temporary entity, living in the continuity of the combination of certain physical and mental elements. The formation of human personality and the universe is similar, both consisting of matter and mind; the only difference being that, in the human



personality, mind is dominant, while, in the universe, matter is dominant. There is no eternal soul in human beings and no God in the universe.

Here it may be asserted that the denial of a separate soul, an atman, and does not obliterate the personality of a man, but it liberates the individual from the false belief in an eternal soul, an absolute egoity. The Buddha's Dhamma, as Ambedkar observes, removes from life the vanity of self, which is the result of an erroneous belief in the existence of atman and karma as separate entities. A man's personality in Buddhism rests on his own deeds and aspirations. This concept of man emanates from a deep ethical insight of the Buddha, who said in the Malunkyaputta Sutta, "The man whose heart is set on the dissolution of individuality feels cheerful, happy, and elated, like the mighty man who has swum unhurt across the swollen Ganges from the one bank to the other"

Non-theistic Moral Order

According to Dr. Ambedkar, there is an order in the physical world; there is an order in the movements and actions of the starry bodies; there is an order by which seasons come and go in regular sequence; there is an order, according to which seeds grow into trees and trees yield fruits, and fruits give seeds. These are called Niyamas (laws), which produce an orderly sequence such as Ruth Niyama, Bija Niyama. Similarly, there is a 'moral order' in society.¹⁹ how is it produced and maintained.

Those, who believe in the existence of God, have no difficulty in assuming that the moral order is maintained by Divine Dispensation. For, God created the world. He is the Supreme Governor and is the author of moral as well as of physical law. Moral law is for man's good, because it ensues from Divine will. Man is bound to obey God, which maintains the moral order. This is an argument in support of the view that the moral order is maintained by Divine Dispensation. Dr. Ambedkar, like other Buddhist thinkers, does not agree with the above view. He argues that, if the moral law has originated from God, and if God is the beginning and end of the moral order, and if man cannot escape from obeying God, why is there so much moral disorder? What is the authority of the Divine Law? What is the hold of the Divine Law over the individual? These are the difficulties in the way of the acceptance of Divine Dispensation.²⁰ somehow; this view is modified in another way by those, who believe in God.

In its modified form, the above theory asserts that creation took effect at the command of God; that the cosmos entered upon its life by His Will and by His direction, and that He imparted to the cosmos, once for all, the energy, which served as the driving power of a stupendous mechanism. God leaves it to Nature to work itself out in obedience to the laws originally given by Him, so that if the moral order fails to work out, the fault is of Nature and not of God.²¹



This theory, according to Ambedkar, only helps to exonerate God from His 'responsibility'. He argues that this theory leaves a lacuna as to why God should leave it to Nature to execute His Laws. What is the use of such an 'absentee God'?²² The Buddhist social theory does not accept the view that God maintains the moral order in the universe. Moreover, it does not believe in the existence of God.

Dr. Ambedkar agrees with the Buddhist view, which holds that God is 'unknown' and 'unseen', that nobody can prove that God has created the world. The belief in God only ends in creating 'superstition' such as religious rites, ceremonies and observances, while superstition is the enemy of the Samma Ditthi (Right view), the most important element in the Buddha's Ashtang marga.²³ Again the belief in God gave rise to belief in the efficacy of 'worship and prayer', and the efficacy of 'worship and prayer' gave rise to the office of the priest. The priest, Dr. Ambedkar remarks, was the evil genius, who created all superstition and there by destroyed the growth of the 'Right View'.²⁴ Thus, believe in God is 'unprofitable'.

Moreover, the Buddhist doctrine of pratyasamutpada is against the belief in God. According to this doctrine, the question is how did the creator create this world: Did God creates something out of nothing or He create something out of something? Dr. Ambedkar argues that it is impossible that something could have been created 'out of nothing'. If the so-called God has created 'something' out of something, then that something out of which something new was created has been in existence before He created anything. Therefore, God cannot be said to be the creator of that something, which has existed before Him, nor He can be said to be the first cause.²⁵

He agrees with the Buddha's view that the centre of religion lies not "in the relation of man to God", but "in the relation between man and man" – in short, "the purpose of religion is to teach man how he should behave towards other men so that all may be happy".²⁶ Thus Ambedkar endeavours to rule out any possibility that God produces and maintains the moral order in the world in favour of Buddha's non-theistic theory. The world has some other grounds for the maintenance of the moral order, but it is not anything 'supernatural', like God.

Ambekar agrees the Buddha's view that "It is the Kamma Niyama and not God, which maintains the moral order in the universe". The moral order in human society may be good or it may be bad rests on "man and nobody else". Kamma means 'man's action' and 'Vipaka' is its 'effect'. Therefore, if the moral order is bad, it is because man does Akushala (bad) Kamma; and if it is good, it is because man does Kushala (good) Kamma.²⁷ The Buddha, Ambedkar says, propounded the law of Kamma and what the Buddha wanted to convey was that "the effect of the deed was bound to follow the deed, as surely as night follow



the day”. Thus, Ambedkar believes that in the religion of the Buddha, “Morality has been given the place of God”, although it does not believe in the existence of God.²⁸

Social Ethics

The religion of the Buddha may be classified in to: (i) Dhamma, (ii) Adhamma and (iii) Saddhamma. Therefore, to understand his religion we must consider all the three – Dhamma, Adhamma and Saddhamma, as interpreted by Ambedkar.

What is Dhamma

Ambedkar pursues the Buddha in indicating the following components of Dhamma:²⁹

- (a) To maintain purity of life is Dhamma: There are three forms of purity – purity of body, of speech and of mind. To keep purity of body, one must abstain from taking life, from stealing, and from wrong practice in sensual lusts; for purity of speech, one must abstain from falsehood and from idle babble; and for purity of mind, one should not be covetous or malevolent of heart and must have right view.
- (b) To reach perfection in life is Dhamma: There are three perfections – perfection in body, speech and mind. This three-fold perfection is possible by the destruction of the asvas – the heart’s release, the release by insight.
- (c) To live in Nibbana is Dhamma: Nothing can give real happiness as Nibbana. Nibbana means release from passion and is to be reached by following the Noble Eight-fold Path. The idea underlying Nibbana is that it is the path of righteousness.
- (d) To give up craving is Dhamma: This component insists upon the control over greed and craving.
- (e) To believe that all compound things are impermanent is Dhamma: This component has three aspects – the impermanence of composite things, the impermanence of the individual being and the impermanence of the self nature of conditioned things.
- (f) To believe that Karma is the instrument of the moral order is Dhamma.

What is Adhamma

Ambedkar has drawn from Buddhism the eight components of Adhamma. They are as follows:

- (a) Beliefs in the supernatural is Adhamma: In repudiating supernaturalism the Buddha has three objects. (i) to lead man to the path of rationalism, (ii) to free man to go in search of truth and (iii) to remove the most potent source of superstition.
- (b) Belief in God is not essentially a part of Dhamma.



- (c) Dhamma, based on union with Brahma, is a false Dhamma.
- (d) Belief in soul is Adhamma.
- (e) Belief in sacrifice is Adhamma.
- (f) Belief based on speculation is Adhamma.
- (g) Mere reading the books of Dhamma is Not-Dhamma.
- (h) Belief in the infallibility of books of Dhamma is Not-Dhamma.

The functions of Saddhamma

- (i) To cleanse the mind of its impurities.
- (ii) To make the world a kingdom of righteousness.

Besides of these functions of Saddhamma, the Buddha emphasized two other functions, which he regarded as of supreme importance:

The first is the “training of man’s instincts and dispositions” as distinguished from “offering prayers or doing sacrifices”. The second thing to which the Buddha attached great importance is the ‘courage’ to stand by what is right, even if one is alone. How does Dhamma become Saddhamma? This has been well depicted by Dr. Ambedkar as follows:

Dhamma to be Saddhamma must promote Prajna

- (a) Dhamma is Saddhamma, when it makes learning open to all.
- (b) Dhamma is Saddhamma, when it teaches that mere learning is not enough, it may lead to pedantry. Learning is not enough, it requires something more, i.e., intellect.
- (c) Dhamma is Saddhamma, when it teaches that what is needed is Prajna. Vidya is ‘knowledge’, ‘learning’. Prajna is ‘insight’. Saddhamma must attach more importance than Vidya to Prajna.

Dhamma to be Saddhamma must promote Maitri

- (a) Dhamma is Saddhamma, when it teaches that mere Prajna is not enough, it must be accompanied by Sila. Apart from Sila, knowledge has no value.
- (b) Dhamma is Saddhamma only, when it teaches that besides Prajna and Sila, what is necessary is Karuna. Karuna is “love of man to man”. Karuna is one of the pillars of the Buddha’s religion.
- (c) Dhamma is Saddhamma only, when it teaches that more than Karuna what is necessary is Maitri. Karuna is love for human beings only. Maitri is love for all living beings. This message is more valuable to the modern world than it had ever been. Karuna and Maitri are a unique blend of the Buddha’s message for universal peace, for a new and better world, a harmonious living, based on the spirit of love and good-will.



Dhamma to be Saddhamma must pull down all social Barriers

- (a) Dhamma to be Saddhamma must break down barriers between man and man.
- (b) Dhamma to be Saddhamma must teach that worth and not birth is the measure of man.
- (c) Dhamma to be Saddhamma must promote Equality between man and man. He argues that a religion, which does not preach equality, is not 'worth having'.

The Spiritual Values in Life

The spiritual values in the Buddhist way of life make for freedom from Dukkha (pain). Man's life is essentially good; and his life is meaningful; but his life is distorted by his own craving, lust and vanity; and craving, lust and vanity are the main causes of all miseries and sorrows. Thus, the aim of human existence, in the Buddhist view, is to get rid of Dukkha and to realize the peace of Nibbana through control over passion. The real purpose of spiritual values in Buddhism is to bring about freedom from Dukkha – social, political and economic.

The recognition of the four Noble Truths is the first step towards spiritual discipline. It is that knowledge of things, which is fundamental in all human societies. To go through the Eight-fold Path and to acquire the ten parmitas – sila (good moral temperament); dana (giving one possessions); uppekha (detachment); nekkhama (renunciation of pleasures); virya (right endeavour); khanti (forbearance); sacca (truth); adhitana (resolute); karuna (love to human beings); maitri (love to all living beings) is to realize the aim of spiritual perfection, the great peace of Nibbana, which will essentially lead to human fellowship, i.e., spiritualism, in today's society.

Conclusion

He agrees with the Buddha's view that the centre of religion lies not "in the relation of man to God", but "in the relation between man and man" – in short, "the purpose of religion is to teach man how he should behave towards other men so that all may be happy". Thus Ambedkar endeavors to rule out any possibility that God produces and maintains the moral order in the world in favor of Buddha's non-theistic theory. The world has some other grounds for the maintenance of the moral order, but it is not anything 'supernatural', like God.

All that Dr. Ambedkar aspired and desired to attain through religion may be explained in these points: peace and tranquility of mind; fortitude and consolation in adversity; social justice in human relations; and service of suffering humanity in the world. He found all these things in the Buddha's religion. The ordinary man seeks his rest, peace and hope in soul and God, in next birth. For him, all questions find their answer in the grace of God. But, Dr. Ambedkar did not seek refuge in such speculations. He sought refuge in the



Buddha and his Dhamma based on the spirit of the universal compassion, wisdom and right understanding. The Dhamma, as he found in it, carries man in his onward and upward march to truth and moral regeneration by human efforts alone. Thus, in the Buddha's Religion of Humanity, Dr. Ambedkar saw the true place for right knowledge and struggle for social justice, in the sacrifice of egoism, for all human beings.

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