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## Dr. Ambedkar and “Untouchability”: Redefining life through Buddhism

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### **Abstract:**

Dr. B.R Ambedkar was a twentieth century political and social reformer. Born as a Dalit, his works and efforts have impacted millions of people residing in India. He stood as the leader to ensure social justice and peace among the Dalit community. This article illustrates the relationship between casteism, and Ambedkar’s adoption of a new religion called Buddhism in two stages. First, I shall define what caste system is, and why there was a need for Ambedkar to abolish Hinduism and adopt Buddhism. Second, I will explain how Buddhism helped Ambedkar to accomplish his aim of social justice and equality for Dalit community. I conclude my suggestions by stating that the principles of ‘rationality’ and ‘freedom’ play an essential role in guiding one’s moral lives.

**Keywords:** Untouchability, Buddhism, Ambedkar

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**Introduction:**

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, whom Christopher Queen describes as “the *Untouchable* who earned advanced academic degrees in the West; launched a *civil rights movement*, newspapers, service organizations, colleges, and political parties for the outcastes; drafted *India’s constitution*; and led millions to a revitalized *Buddhism*”<sup>2</sup> (emphasis added), was a twentieth century socio-political and religious reformer whose works and efforts have impacted millions of people, especially the Dalit community residing in India. Ambedkar is one of the foremost social justice activists of the twentieth century. Despite a member of a low caste Mahar community, who were required to do menial tasks to avoid polluting the upper caste, young Bhimrao rejected the ‘sacred’ hierarchy of casteism and adopted Buddhism as a religion to free himself and his community against the social oppression<sup>3</sup>. This article will examine Ambedkar’s perspectives to

the relationship between casteism and Buddhism, and how his faith in Buddhism promoted social justice and peace among all.

First, I will review the caste system that was prevalent in India. It is important to gain insight into the hierarchy of caste system to understand the implication of faith in a religion called Buddhism. The second section of the article will briefly summarize the role of religion in people’s relation. The law of religion should aim to unite people rather than divide them on their castes. The third section explores Ambedkar’s views of Buddhism to demonstrate how religion may function an emancipatory role in people’s lives which ensure social justice and equality among all. Though the philosophy of Buddhism encompasses many principles, I will limit my discussion to the role of Buddhism as a religion in promoting non-discrimination, equality, and respect.

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<sup>2</sup> Queen, C. S. (1996). Dr. Ambedkar and the hermeneutics of Buddhist liberation. *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, 4572.

<sup>3</sup> Dunajeva, J., & Ciaschi, P. (2017). Alternative education and Roma empowerment: A

case study of the Dr. Ambedkar Buddhist school in Sajókaza, Hungary. *Indian Journal of Social Work*, 78(1), 61-74.

## The Caste System:

To appreciate the work of Ambedkar against caste-based oppression, we must understand the social reality in which Ambedkar was born. Though there is a contested debate about the origins of the caste system, there exists a common agreement on the stratification of the caste<sup>4</sup>. The caste system that divides the Hindus based on their *karma* and *dharma* is believed to be about 3000 years old. Manusmriti is regarded as oldest authoritative book on Hindu law that acknowledges the hierarchy of caste system<sup>5</sup>. The caste system divides Hindus into four main categories- Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (traders), and the Shudras (servants). It is the Shudras that are referred as the Dalit community. It is argued that the Dalits originated from the feet of the Lord Brahma, and to this date it is accepted by all that the Dalits should

remain like so. Roy notes that the “top of the caste pyramid is considered pure and has plenty of entitlements. The bottom is considered polluted and has no entitlements but plenty of duties”<sup>6</sup>. A variety of terms are used to represent Dalits in the Indian community- “Untouchable”, “Oppressed/lower castes”, “Scheduled castes/tribes”, and Gandhi’s term “Harijans” that is considered as degrading for people of the lower caste<sup>7</sup>. Webster points out that Ambedkar referred the term Dalit to “broken men”, signifying metaphorically a caste that is broken and cannot be united<sup>8</sup>.

While the caste system is complex, the fundamental part of the hierarchy is that individuals once born into a caste will remain into that caste till the death. Kshīrasāgara considers caste hierarchy as the most “venomous evil of Hindu society”<sup>9</sup>. The dehumanization of Dalits included:

<sup>4</sup> Mukerji, S. (2020). The “untouchable” who touched millions: Dr. BR Ambedkar, Navayana Buddhism, and complexity in social work scholarship on religion. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, 39(4), 474-492.

<sup>5</sup> Jois, M. R. (2015). *Ancient Indian law: Eternal values in Manu Smriti*. Universal Law Publishing.

<sup>6</sup> Roy, A. (2017). *The Doctor and the Saint: Caste, Race, and Annihilation of Caste: The Debate between BR Ambedkar and MK Gandhi*. Haymarket Books+ ORM.

<sup>7</sup> Lokamitra, D. (1999). The Dhamma revolution in India: Peacemaking begins with the eradication of the caste system. *Buddhist peacework: Creating cultures of peace*, 29-38.

<sup>8</sup> Fitzgerald, T., & Michael, S. (1999). *Untouchable: Dalits in Modern India*.

<sup>9</sup> Kshīrasāgara, R. (1994, p.9). *Dalit movement in India and its leaders, 1857-1956*: MD Publications Pvt. Ltd.

deprivation of water, and food; relegating to lower jobs; deprivation of education and health; and exclusion and humiliation. However, it is not limited to this. The deprivation of basic social conditions such as house<sup>10</sup>; removing feces from the toilet; sexual assaults<sup>11</sup>; public beating and humiliation, not looking into the eyes of the upper caste people are some of the examples of humiliation that Dalits faced in their lives<sup>12</sup>.

Ambedkar was born in a Dalit family and encountered social harms throughout his life. Jaffrelot describes an incident where Bhimrao and his brother were thrown off from a rickshaw cart when it was known that they belonged to a Mahar community<sup>13</sup>. He was made to drink muddy water, and forced to sit away from 'normal students' in school in order not to pollute them. Incidents

such as these led Ambedkar to his schools, from there he succeeded in a high prestigious college and earned doctorates in economics from top institutions.

The struggle of emancipation was led by Dr. B.R Ambedkar during 1919 to 1956. Bhimrao challenged the traditional caste system and declared that "though I was born a Hindu, I will not die a Hindu". By 1919, Ambedkar embarked on his life to challenge the traditional Hindu caste system. His efforts towards the caste-based oppression are numerous. Some of them included the development of social policy, consciousness raising, social development, texts publications such as *Mooknayak* (Leader of the voiceless), and *Janata* (The people) to arouse people's consciousness against caste system<sup>14</sup>. He also formed various institutions such as *Bahishkrit Hitakarani*

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<sup>10</sup> Kumar, V. R. (2016). History of Indian Environmental Movement: A Study of Dr BR Ambedkar from the Perspective of Access to Water. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, 8(2), 239-245.

<sup>11</sup> Sadangi, H. C. (2008). *Dalit: the downtrodden of India*: Gyan Publishing House.

<sup>12</sup> Omvedt, G. (2006). *Dalit visions: The anti-caste movement and the construction of an Indian identity*: Orient Blackswan.

<sup>13</sup> Jaffrelot, C. (2005). *Dr. Ambedkar and untouchability: Fighting the Indian caste system*: Columbia University Press.

<sup>14</sup> Kshīrasāgara, R. (1994). *Dalit movement in India and its leaders, 1857-1956*: MD Publications Pvt. Ltd; Mukerji, S. (2020). The "untouchable" who touched millions: Dr. BR Ambedkar, Navayana Buddhism, and complexity in social work scholarship on religion. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, 39(4), 474-492.

*Sabha* (Depressed Classes Institute) and Dalit secondary schools which served as exemplars for Dalit's revolt against government<sup>15</sup>. These issues represented Dalits as the equal members of the society and demanded social justice from all.

### The role of Religion:

Considering that the caste system originated from the sacred texts of Manusmriti, it follows that Ambedkar's oppression against the caste system brought him in conflict with religion. Though Ambedkar was not against religion, he condemned religion that divided Hindus. He decided to adopt a religion that would endorse equality and love for all. He protested against Hinduism by burning the sacred texts of Manusmriti and organizing a rally for Dalits to enter into the Hindu temples. His heated exchange with M.K Gandhi shows that Ambedkar wanted to abolish Hinduism as a religion

altogether, as untouchability will remain as long as Hinduism remain<sup>16</sup>.

As Ambedkar himself notes,

*Because we have the misfortune of calling ourselves Hindu, we are treated thus. If we were members of another Faith, none would dare treat so. Choose any religion which give you equality of status and treatment. We shall repair our mistake now. I had the misfortune of being born with the stigma of an untouchable. However, it is not my fault; but I will not die a Hindu, for this is my power<sup>17</sup>*

Ambedkar's intention to convert into a religion that did not endorse caste hierarchy was to promote social justice for Dalits. A complete change in one's life can be brought only by entering into a new body<sup>18</sup>, and in Ambedkar's case the new body was Buddhism. One of the reason for his adoption of a new faith was that the traditional Hindus would not get rid of the caste system at any cost<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> Thorat, S. (2002). Oppression and denial: Dalit discrimination in the 1990s. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 572-578; Zelliott, E. (2013). *Ambedkar's world: the making of Babasaheb and the Dalit movement*. Navayana Publishing.

<sup>16</sup> Singh, A. (2014). Gandhi and Ambedkar: Irreconcilable Differences? *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, 18(3), 413-449.

<sup>17</sup> Ambedkar, B. (1990). Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 7. *Government of Maharashtra, Bombay*.

<sup>18</sup> Ambedkar, B. R. (2004). Castes in India: Their mechanism, genesis and development.

<sup>19</sup> Sangharakshita, U. (2006). The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path [AUDIOBOOK][UNABRIDGED].



Ambedkar's adoption of Buddhism took revolt against Hinduism at a new level in two stages. First, the choice of Buddhism was based upon "reason" rather than "revelation"<sup>20</sup>. Buddhism as a religion is not revealed through sacred texts or the holy words of priests. Second, Ambedkar's freedom to choose a new religion was to show people that there exists no eternal guiding principle that dictates people's lives<sup>21</sup>. His investigations to choose Buddhism shows that Ambedkar undermined the idea of divinity and the sacred moral code. That the rationality of will and judgment is superior than the divine code<sup>22</sup>.

The question arises why Buddhism as a religion was adopted by Ambedkar? Why there was a need to adopt any religion? There are two contrasting opinions. Taylor is of the view that Ambedkar's adoption of Buddhism is a political strategy to create a counter-culture against the

Hindu tradition<sup>23</sup>; but others are of the opposite view. Narian and Ahir notes that Ambedkar chose Buddhism for its egalitarian principles and not as a political tool<sup>24</sup>.

Broadly speaking, Buddhism arose against the traditional Hinduism principles. Buddhism criticizes caste system and the principle of divine supreme authority. It is against the view that the holy texts speak the truth. Buddhism focus on an individual's karma (action) that determines their dharma (duty) rather than their jati (birth)<sup>25</sup>. A justification of the critique of caste system is the central tenet of Buddhism philosophy. Though Ambedkar adopted Buddhism, he did not endorse any of the principles of contemplation and 'practices' which a Buddha follower had to adopt. It is due to this reason that Ambedkar's adoption of Buddhism is called Navayana (new) Buddhism.

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<sup>20</sup> Verma, V. (2010, p.57). Reinterpreting Buddhism: Ambedkar on the Politics of Social Action. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 56-65.

<sup>21</sup> Kapur, K. (2013). *Hindu Dharma-A Teaching Guide*: Xlibris Corporation.

<sup>22</sup> Tejani, S. (2007, p.63). Reflections on the Category of Secularism in India. *The crisis of secularism in India*, 45.

<sup>23</sup> Taylor, R. W. (1972, p.46). The Ambedkarite Buddhists. *Ambedkar and the neo-Buddhist movement*, 129-163.

<sup>24</sup> Narain, A. K., & Ahir, D. (1994, p.94). Dr. Ambedkar, Buddhism, and social change.

<sup>25</sup> Gethin, R. (1998). *The foundations of Buddhism*: Oxford University Press.

### **Social justice through the lens of Buddhism:**

Ambedkar's conversion of Hinduism to Buddhism was necessary for two reasons. First, Ambedkar knew that equality cannot be ensured based upon Hinduism principles. Since, caste system dominated the Hindu religion, a new religion was needed that is based on the principles of equality<sup>26</sup>. Second, the principle of conversion reinterprets a historical past: when one converts from one religion to another, one values the change which he has undergone from his past.

The goal of Buddhism is one of liberation, compassion, and peace. But this was not the view when Ambedkar wrote *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. He wanted to adopt humanistic principles of Buddhism that will value the role of Dalits in social action. To accomplish this task he explored the historical past of Buddhism that was relevant for his mission. He propagated two essential messages of Buddhism, rationality and

freedom, to abolish untouchability from society.

Rationality is the core message of Ambedkar's Buddhism. When one is rational, one thinks about the causes and reasons for an action. Rather than accepting everything in the name of God, an individual questions the principles of religion. One should not be blind in accepting what the sacred texts says, one should be willing enough to question any supreme authority<sup>27</sup>. Second, freedom ensures one's freedom of religion. One should not be forced to practice any religion. One should be free in his/her social actions. Religion should be used to provide guidance and collective consciousness to people rather than degrading them to a dehumanized level<sup>28</sup>.

Ambedkar values the principle of Dhamma more than the principle of religion<sup>29</sup>. Religion should not be a "personal" relation rather it should be social. It should play some role in

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<sup>26</sup> Fitzgerald, T. (1999). Ambedkar, Buddhism and the concept of religion. *Untouchable: Dalits in Modern India*, 57-71.

<sup>27</sup> Loy, D. (2003). *The great awakening: A Buddhist social theory*: Simon and Schuster.

<sup>28</sup> Gokhale, B. G. (1999). Theravada Buddhism and Modernization: Anagarika Dhammapala and BR Ambedkar. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 34(1), 33-45.

<sup>29</sup> Ambedkar, B. R. (2011). *The Buddha and his dhamma: a critical edition*: Oxford University Press.

people's relations to others. Dhamma means righteousness, which means right relations between man and man. One can abandon religion, but one should not abandon Dhamma.

The caste system was the result of following a religion and not a Dhamma. When one values the relation which a human being shares with other human being, he values the principle of treating him right. Ambedkar explained the view that the center of religion lies not in relation to God, but it lies in relation to people. The religion should not promise salvation, rather it should teach how to treat others with respect and love.

As a leader of the Dalit movement, Ambedkar through his efforts ensured that the social transformation should occur in a political society. He wanted Dalits to question their given identity and redefine life according to their own principles. He was aware that by seeking conversion, a Dalit will try to live his life on his own terms. He should form his own independent beliefs and opinions. When one attains individual liberty, one is in the position to attain individual salvation. Buddhism, for Ambedkar, is neither

metaphysical nor spiritual, but is rather a moral guide to individual's actions. The buddha is neither a metaphysical nor spiritual entity, but is a rational and ethical person who questions the existence of his life and redefine it accordingly.

