

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Role in Revival of Buddhism and It's Impact on Socio-Economic Development of Ignored Humanity in India

Mr. Ravi Shankar Singh¹

One of the greatest epoch-making events in the history of India took place in the sixth Century B.C. When Gautama the Buddha delivered the First sermon at Isipatnam (Sarnath), and exhorted his disciples to “*Go and wander forth for the gain of the many, for the welfare of the many, in compassion for the world, and to preach a life of holiness, perfect and pure*”. Soon his message of equality: of hope and peace; of kindness and compassion became the talk of the day; and the name and fame of the Buddha Spread far and wide. Of all the religions of the Sixth Century B.C. Gautama Buddha's religion had more popular brahminical social base. The Buddha's Dharma stands on the doctrine which is ‘rationally possible for the welfare of human being.

After the Mahaparinirvana of the Buddha in 483 B.C., the rise and fall of Buddhism in India can be said to have passed through many phases. The famous Maurya King Ashoka embraced Buddhism. This was an epoch-making event. Through his agents Ashoka spread Buddhism into Central Asia, West Asia and Srilanka, *Suvarnabhumi* and thus transformed it into a world religion.

Apart from Ashoka, other rulers like, Milinda, Kanishka, Harshavardhana, were worthy to be mentioned for their efforts to preserve Buddhist Culture in India. Although Buddhism disappeared in the land of its birth, it continues to hold ground in the countries of South Asia, South-East Asia and East Asia. By the twelfth Century A.D. Buddhism in India was only confined to a small pocket in North-East and Himalayan Region of India. Even there it was almost closeted within the monasteries. So when the Muslim army advanced towards Bihar; sacked the Buddhist establishment at Nalanda, Vikramasila and Odantapuri; massacred most of the monks residing in them, the rout of Buddhism was complete. The Bhikku Sangha was wiped out and Buddhist Shrines were destroyed.

During the period of Twelfth Century to Nineteenth Century, The Dark Age was in fact the darkest. Many numbers of Stupas and Monasteries were destroyed and plundered by the opponents of Buddhism, on the one hand and completely ignored and allowed to decay by the masses. On the other hand, many number of the Buddhist places were also converted into Hindu or Muslim places of worship. These included the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh-Gaya which was occupied by a Hindu Mahant in Sixteenth Century. Thus, by and by every trace of Buddhism was effaced from the land of its birth.

The revived Buddhism in India did not travel a very long Journey in India. Archaeologically, the gradual and slow revival of the Buddhism in India continued from 1750 A.D. to 1890 A.D. by the British Scholars like James Princep, Alaxander Cunningham, Sir William Jones and several others. Religious and Systematic revival of Buddhism in India began with the arrival of young Sinhalese Buddhist named Anagarika Dharmapala, who inspired by an article of Sir Edwin Arnold written in The Daily Telegraph on pitiable Condition of BodhGaya, established the Maha Bodhi society in Ceylon of May 31st, 1891 and his contribution to the revival of Buddhism on historical level is outstanding.

¹ Assistant Professor, Centre for Buddhist studies , Mahatma Gandhi Antarrashtriya Hindi Vishwavidyalaya (M.G.A.H.V.)Wardha, Maharashtra, India, e-mail rssingh_du@hotmail.com

But the first example of the active application of the social doctrines of Buddhism on the mass level was seen by the Indian people during 1950 & after Independence, the revival movement took a new turn as Buddhism came to be associated with nationalism and ancient India culture, when the Constituent Assembly was busy in drafting a Constitution for free India, the question of the National flag and the National Emblem baffled the constitution makers. They ultimately turned towards the Buddhist heritage which represented the glorious days of India under the aegis of the Buddhist kings. The Buddhist Wheel of Dharma and the Lion from the capital of Asoka were adopted as National Symbols for independent India. The inspiring personality behind the adaptation of these symbols of Buddhist culture as National symbols of India was no one else but Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who was the chairman of Drafting Committee.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was born on 1891 in a Mahar family of Ambevade Village of Ratnagiri district in Maharashtra. His father Ramaji Sakpal was a religious man. He inculcated the spirit of religion in the minds of his children. It was but natural that Dr. Ambedkar was brought in a religious atmosphere. His father advised him to read Ramayan, Mahabharata and other Hindu Scriptures. In that time Mahar caste which was considered as untouchable and as part of Hindu Society. He felt that there was no right or freedom to study, to live with the common society, to participate in the Social function to the lower caste people and especially, untouchables were being treated very cruelly by some feudal minded people of upper caste.

When he passed Matriculation examination in 1907, a meeting was held to honor young Bhimrao. In this meeting his teacher K.A. Keluskar presented him his book 'Life of Gautam Buddha'. He avidly read the biography of the Buddha. This book had made a deep impression on the mind of Young Bhimrao. After having the higher education with help of scholarship, he tried to improve the condition of suppressed class within the Hindu society.

Dr. Ambedkar had been studying about other religions for a long time and, then after, he began to do so with more commitments so that he could choose the appropriate religion for himself and his followers. He became greatly impressed by studying Tipitaka, the collection of Buddha's words. He was very much optimistic and stated that India would rise once again to its glory, when people turn to Buddhism and practice the high ethical principles preached by the Buddha. And he further said, "It was during Brahminical period that Buddhism was born. This was because Buddhism opposed inequality, authority and division of society into various caste. Equality is the main feature of Buddhism. The Dhamma of Buddha gives freedom of thought and freedom of self development.

Dr. Ambedkar decided to renounce the Hindu religion on Oct. 13, 1935, a conference of depressed class was held at Yeola (Nasik) and he declared "*I was born as a Hindu but I will not die as a Hindu, for, this is in my power*". He had to take this decision to convert in Buddhism because he found that the satyagraha movement launched by him since Mahar Satyagraha for water and Kalaram Temple entry Satyagraha had not succeed in changing the caste Hindus attitude at all. The Yeola Declaration became a rock landmark in the struggle of the Depressed classes to social equality. In Mahar conference in Bombay on 31st May 1936, he said that "*Religion is for Man and not man for Religion.*"

Dr. Ambedkar gave number of speeches on the Buddha and Buddhism. In one speech he stated, "*I would say that the rise of Buddhism in India was as significant as French Revolution. Buddhism paved way for establishment of democracy.*" On 25th May, 1950, in Colombo Conference, he said, "*Buddhism may have disappeared in material form but as a spiritual force it still exists in India*". In 1951 he had participated in the Buddha jayanti celebrations organised by Mahabodhi society of India, New Delhi. He spoke on this occasion that, "if the rest of the Hindu society does not co-operate, then we, the member of the

Scheduled Castes, will go on our own and try once again to bring back Buddhism to its former glory and prestige in this country.”

In 1954, it became crystal clear that Dr. Ambedkar would embrace Buddhism. In BBC broadcast 3rd October 1954 he said, *“My social philosophy may be said to be enshrined in three words: liberty, equality and fraternity. I have derived them from the teaching of my master, the Buddha.”*

In 1956, Dr. Ambedkar made known publicly his determination to revive Buddhism in India. He made his followers aware of the Buddhist doctrines by his lectures and writings and established that the social equality can only be accessible through the path shown by the Buddha. In a talk *“Why I like Buddhism”*, given to BBC London on May 12th 1956, he said *“I prefer Buddhism because it gives three principles in combination which no other religion does. All other religions are bothering themselves with ‘god’, ‘soul’ and ‘life after death’. Buddhism teaches ‘Prajna’ (understanding as against superstition and super naturism). It teaches ‘Karuna’ (compassion). It teaches ‘Samta’ (equality). This is what make there appeal to me. These three principles also make appeal to the world. Neither god nor soul can save society.”* He announced, *“There was only man who raise his voice against separatism and untouchability and that was god Buddha.”*

On 24th May 1956, the 2500 Buddha *jayanti* day, at a public meeting, Dr. Ambedkar announced that he would embrace on 14th October 1956 at Nagpur, the *vijaydashami* day. On the morning of 14th October 1956, Dr. Ambedkar embraced Buddhism along with his more than five lakh followers. The world witnessed this great event as on unprecedented phenomenon of mass conversion. This historical event acknowledges Dr. Ambedkar as greatest reviles of Buddhism of modern times and enhanced the importance of his thoughts and interpretation of Buddhism. He became the savior of the ignored humanity and opened the gates of Buddhism to all of them. Buddhism has given them a new life. They now do not feel themselves humiliated and inferior to anybody. This change has brought them nearer to other Buddhist communities of the world. Dr. Ambedkar has strengthened this cultural bond between India and Buddhist countries of world.

There is no doubt that religious conversion requires a man to sacrifice all that is traditionally attached to him. Religious conversion cannot be possible unless there is a strong mind and clear thinking in the person who wants it. Ambedkar’s religious conversion was not revenge. It was not even against the tradition of this country. He said, *“Buddhism is a part and parcel of Bharatiya culture. I have taken care that my conversion will not harm the condition of the culture and history of this land”*.

Dr. Ambedkar’s whole life was shaped and influenced by his bitter experiences. He inquired into the origin, growth and development of caste and untouchability in India. These untouchable Hindus were denied the use of public wells, and were permitted only to drink any filthy water they could find. Their children were not admitted to schools attended by the Hindu children. Though they worshipped the gods of Hindus, observed the same festivals, the Hindu temples were closed to them.

According to Dr. Ambedkar, caste has killed public spirit, destroyed the sense of public charity, and made public opinion impossible, virtue has become caste-ridden and morality has become caste bound. There is no sympathy to the deserving. There is appreciation of virtue but only when the man is a fellow caste man. He pointed out that the roots of untouchability are in the caste system. Hence, for the eradication of untouchability, annihilation of caste was absolutely essential. He also pointed out that his ideal society will be based on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. Caste will cease to be an operative force only when inter-dining and inter-marriages become matters of common course.

In order to promote education among untouchables, Dr. Ambedkar set up hostels for untouchable students at different places like Panvel, Pune, Nasik, Sholapur, Thane and Dharwar with public donations and grants from district and local authorities. Having free facility of boarding to the hostel inmates, these were of considerable help in spreading education among untouchables. Though colleges were open to untouchable students, apart from financial constraints social and cultural stigma also affected full development of their personality in the Hindu dominated colleges. Therefore, Ambedkar wanted to set up separate institutions for the untouchables. He established the People's Educational Society in July, 1945. The main objectives were to:

- search after the trust
- start, establish and conduct educational institutions or give aid to such institutions.

He repeatedly emphasized the need to explode the myth created by the Hindu orthodoxy that the untouchables were incapable of learning.

In the social context, untouchability, which was the by-product of caste system, was not only a form of social discrimination but also a source of economic exploitation. Untouchables were not allowed to enter the villages during day time and to use the public utility such as roads, tanks, etc. they were made to live on the outskirts of the village and physically segregated from the main stream of life. They were assigned those occupations which were unclean, filthy and they were forced to remain in the same occupations. They were discriminated in the product market and in the factor market on the ground of untouchability. Dr. Ambedkar observed that untouchability was more than a religious system. It was also an economic system worse than slavery. In slavery, the master at any rate of slave would decline. However, under untouchability the maintenance of the untouchables was the responsibility of no body. Untouchability as an economic system permits exploitation with obligation. In view of the above reasons, Dr. Ambedkar felt that there was an immediate need of annihilating caste. So that there exit no contradiction between socio-economic conditions existing in the Indian society and political democracy.

Dr. Ambedkar supported the socialistic society. He pleads for socialism with moral foundations. He does not want to confine socialism only to the sphere of economic reform. He says, *"If liberty is the ideal, if liberty means the destruction of the dominion, which one man holds over another, then obviously, it cannot be insisted upon that economic reform only. If the source of power and dominion is, at any given time or in any given society, social and religious, then social reform and religious reforms must be accepted as the necessary sort of reform."* He attempted to build a rational view of life with full utilization of machinery and modern civilization. He declares that the slogan of a democratic society must be machinery and more machinery, civilization and more civilization in order to provide every person some leisure for leading a life of culture.

Dr. Ambedkar stands for the emancipation of the poorer sections of Indian society. He suggested state society. He suggested state socialism. He said, *"the main purpose behind state socialism is to put an obligation on the state to plan the economic life of the people on lines which would lead to the highest point of productivity without closing every avenue to private enterprise, and also provide for the equitable distribution of wealth"*. His advocacy of state socialism amounts to an advocacy of the mixed economy. He does not want annihilation of any class, but the actual reformation of class structure so that the economic benefit may reach the doors of all persons. He was against complete nationalization of economy and state monopoly. He favours state ownership in the fields of insurance, industry and agricultural land only. He does not want the suppression of private property. He believes that India should industrialize otherwise it would perish.

In India, where a large section of people are landless, the changes in agriculture planning cannot bring material property to all in rural areas. Only collective forms, Dr. Ambedkar insists, it can help them, provided that agriculture becomes a state industry. He undoubtedly wants to bring about economic stability through the law of the constitution. He sought to establish a balance between state control and private enterprises through his rational approach of state socialism. He does not indulge in any extreme type of individualism or of socialism. His formulation of state socialism does not suppress individual liberty and also retains the system of private enterprise, while giving the greatest benefit to the poorer sections of society. His concept of state socialism stresses the three economic processes of human society:

- Adaptation of the key industries and agricultural land to meet the demands of the poorer sections of society:
- Maintenance of the productive resources by the state:
- A just distribution of the common produce among the different people without any distinction of caste or creed.

Dr. Ambedkar believed that the state has to play crucial role in restructuring the society under democratic polity and the foundation of democracy would be feeble and shaky if there was no social and economic democracy consistent with political democracy. He proposed a strategy of development based on growth with justice. Various scholarly works of Ambedkar indicate his contribution to economic thought and explain his deep insights into the socio-economic problems of Indian society and his perspective of development.

The Constitution, which was drafted by Dr. Ambedkar, provides a framework with a three pronged strategy to improve the situation of ignored humanities in India:

1. **Protective Arrangements** - Such measures as are required to enforce equality, to provide punitive measures for transgressions, to eliminate established practices that perpetuate inequities, etc. A number of laws were enacted to operationalize the provisions in the Constitution. Examples of such laws include The Untouchability Practices Act, 1955, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, The Employment of Manual scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, etc.
2. **Affirmative action** - Provide positive preferential treatment in allotment of jobs and access to higher education, as a means to accelerate the integration of the SCs and STs with mainstream society. Affirmative action is also popularly referred to as Reservation.
3. **Development** - Provide for resources and benefits to bridge the wide gap in social and economic condition between the SCs/STs and other communities.

On account of the relentless efforts of Dr. Ambedkar, untouchability was abolished and practice of it has been made a cognizable offence. Despite the penal provisions in the scheduled castes prevention of atrocities act, the incidence of untouchability is still prevailing in India. The insults, indignities, inhuman treatment and atrocities against the untouchables continue unabated. The torture and the most chilling brutal killings at Kanchikacherla of Andhra Pradesh in sixties, Belchi of Bihar in seventies, Karamchedu of Andhara Pradesh in eighties and Tsundur of Andhra Pradesh in nineties and Khairlanji in the first decade of the present century and other recorded incidence taken note by the national commission of scheduled caste are a standing testimony to the inhuman and cruel treatment meted out to the ex-untouchables. Justice Punnaiah committee of Andhra Pradesh proves beyond doubt that untouchability and caste discrimination are a reality and there rampant prevalence in some form or the other is an undisputed fact.

Dr. Ambedkar argued that the untouchables were a separate element in the national life of India. The move for separate electorate and separate settlement was need of untouchables. After Dr. Ambedkar become an ardent student of Buddhist literature. He founds that the Buddha was really a man, who showed much sympathy for the common people and had a synthetic outlook on life. So therefore after Dr. Ambedkar, many conversions had done by many leaders. The most recent conversion has taken place in India at village Aripur, Jahanabad district of Bihar on 30th march 2010. About thousand, mostly educated young people accepted Buddhism and keeps its glory as the ancient period.

It was the effort and vision of Dr. Ambedkar that the revival of Buddhism in India and socio-economic development of ignored humanity in India took a new pace. The population of Buddhism in India which was just Six lakh in 1956 census grew up to Eighty lakh in 2001 census. In the view of Dr. Ambedkar the main pillar of socio-economic development in any society is education, which is already stated in this research paper. The literacy rate of this ignored humanity is gradually improving. It was merely 18.3% in 1951 census and rose up to 56.2% in 2001 census. All the facts and figures simply indicate that neither the revival of Buddhism nor the Socio-Economic development of Ignored Humanity in India would be possible in the absence of Dr. Ambedkar.

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