



NEO-BUDDHIST MOVEMENT IN INDIA: CRITICAL INVESTIGATION OF APPLIED BUDDHISM BY DR B R AMBEDKAR TO RESOLVE SOCIAL CONFLICTS AND SOCIAL APARTHEID IN INDIA

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Introduction

The Neo-Buddhist Movement is one of the most effective Identity based New Social Movement in Modern India led by the architect of the Indian constitution and the Human rights champions of India's former untouchables, Dr. Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar. The sole purpose of this movement was to put an end to the age old social conflict arising out of untouchability, discrimination and atrocities perpetuated against the low caste untouchables by the upper caste Hindus. The untouchables constitutes more than 17 per cent of India's population today and are historically called by different names like oppressed class, depressed class, Dalits, Ashuts, etc. The British government under the parliament Act of 1935 and the Indian government after the independence listed all the untouchables castes in India in a single common schedule and put them in constitution as scheduled castes. The situation of the Scheduled castes in India even after the 65 years of the self-rule has not changed much. Sangharakshita¹ a western thinker and a Buddhist by choice who spent much of his time in India and worked with the untouchables to the spread of Buddhism in India and also claimed to be closed to Dr Ambedkar rightly described the situation of the untouchables in India in 1980's in the following words:

“There are at present 100,000,000 Untouchables in India, the vast majority of who are underprivileged in every sense of the term. Each year between four and five hundred of them are murdered by their Caste Hindu compatriots, while thousands more are beaten, raped, and

¹Sangharakshita western Buddhist missionary lived in India for more than 20 years and was closely connected with the neo Buddhist Movement in Maharashtra and had personally met Dr Ambedkar in that regards.

tortured and their homes looted and burned. An incalculable number of them are not only subject to social, economic, and religious discrimination but daily suffer personal harassment and humiliation. In the course of the last thousand or so years saints and reformers have sought to ameliorate the lot of the Untouchables – none of them with any great success. The latest and most heroic of these attempts was made by Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, himself an Untouchable by birth, who came to the conclusion that there was no salvation for the Untouchables within Hinduism and that they would have to change their religion. In October 1956 he and half a million of his followers therefore became Buddhists, thus bringing about the renaissance of Buddhism in India and initiating a religious and social revolution of major significance. Though the sufferings of the Jews in Nazi Germany and of the blacks in white supremacist South Africa are well known and widely discussed, the no less horrifying sufferings of the Untouchables at the hands of the Caste Hindus, as well as Ambedkar's heroic efforts to emancipate his people from their age-old slavery, have remained virtually unknown outside India'.²

Conflicts and Conversions

Social apartheid, untouchability and discriminations, denying access to resources and basic amenities to some social groups on the basis of their caste identities is a source of conflict between the backward caste and forward castes in India since thousands of years. According to Dr. Ambedkar the untouchables are born out of these conflicts.³ Today, the scheduled castes in India are often called as former untouchables in the academic discourse but it is quite misleading to call them as former untouchable because the untouchability as a problem still persist in India either in old, traditional form or in anew and modified forms. It is because of these ill-treatment and discriminations that have forced them to renounced Hindu religion and adopts some other faith where they will be treated as a human being and will enjoy equal rights at par with other fellow citizens. The scheduled castes have asserted themselves by way of converting to other religions and today we can see them in all the faiths in India. The Table No. 1 presented below is self-explanatory of this fact.

²Sangharakshita (1986): Ambedkar and Buddhism

³See Who Were Shudras by Dr Ambedkar

Table No, 1 Scheduled Caste /Scheduled Tribes and their Religions in India

Religion	Scheduled Caste	Scheduled Tribe	Total
Buddhist	32 %	7.1 %	39.1 %
Christians	09 %	56.0 %	65.0 %
Sikh	21 %	0.9 %	21.9 %
Hindu	38 %	35 %	75.0 %

(Lajwant Singh, 2015)

According to the Sachar committee Report⁴2006, revealed that scheduled castes and scheduled tribes of India are not limited to the Hindu religion. The sixty one round survey of the NSSO found that 31.9% of Scheduled castes are the followers of Buddhists religion and 21 % of them follows Sikhism, and 65% SCs and STs follows Christianity, and 75% of them follows Hinduism.

If we look at the latest data on the situation of the former untouchables the situation seems to be the more or less same or worsen in some cases. The census of India data on the crime against scheduled caste recorded more than 33,000 cases of atrocities against the Dalits on all India basis per every year and on an average 600 Dalits are murdered and 1500 Dalits women are raped by the caste Hindus every year during preceding 5 to 6 years as shown in the Table No, 1 below.

Table-No. 1: Comparative Incidence of Crime against Scheduled Castes

Sr. No	Crime- head	Year					% Variation in 2012 over 2011
		2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
1	Murder	626	624	570	673	651	-3.3
2	Rape	1,457	1,346	1,349	1557	1576	1.2
3	Kidnapping &Abduction	482	512	511	616	490	-20.5
4	Dacoity	51	44	42	36	27	-25.0
5	Robbery	85	70	75	54	40	-25.9
6	Arson	225	195	150	169	214	26.6
7	Hurt	4216	4410	4376	4247	3855	-9.2
8	Protection of Civil Rights Act	248	168	143	67	62	-7.5

⁴The Sachar committee was set by the previous congress government under the chairmanship of Justice Sachar to assess the status of Muslims in India and make recommendation to the central Govt for their improvement.

9	SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act	11602	11143	10513	11342	12576	10.9
10	Others	14623	15080	14983	14958	14164	-5.3
	Total	33615	32712	32712	33719	33655	-0.2

Source: Census, 2011(provisional)

Untouchability Still Prevails in India?

The practice of Untouchability is legally abolished in India according to Article 17 of the Indian constitution. Government of India has enacted several social legislations to that effect. But due to lack of political will and halfhearted implementations of these legal measures by the caste Hindus sitting in administrative and bureaucratic structures the phenomenon called untouchability is quite rampant in India even today. The short documentary film 'Untouched India' by a south Indian artist and writer Mr Stalin has documented the visual images and audio visuals depicting the wide prevalence of the untouchability even in 21 century in Indian states. The nationwide study comprising of the 11 major Indian states by the Action Aid in the year 2006 has a lot to speak about this in their report.

Table No 2: Forms/Sites of Untouchability in order of their Prevalence

Form/site for Practice of Untouchability	% Practised	Village Practised	% not Practised	Village not Practised	Total survey Villages
Entry into savarna non-Dalit House	73.0	314	17.0	73	430
Interdining	70.1	305	21.8	95	435
Entry into places of worship	64.0	337	29.2	154	527
Treatment of SC women by non-SC women	52.7	282	29.9	160	535
Cremation and burial grounds	48.9	256	46.0	241	524
Access to water facility	48.4	255	43.5	229	527
Marriage processions on public roads	47.4	229	49.9	241	483
Sell by SCs in milk collection Centres (co-operatives)	46.7	162	48.1	167	347
Barber services	46.6	229	41.3	203	491
Washing up clothes by washer man	45.8	194	43.2	183	424

Source: 'Untouchability in Rural India' - A Report Published by Action Aid(2006)

Are Neo Buddhist/Ambedkarites Victims of Caste Atrocities and Conflicts?

The government data do not give the breakup of the incidence of crime religion wise and caste wise. The Neo Buddhists are not treated as separate from the other Dalits and hence the figures indicated above do not tell us exactly how many of these atrocities were actually

committed against the Neo Buddhist. But, in a study conducted by me in the year 2006⁵ and by some others confirmed that most of the victims of such caste based atrocities were Neo Buddhist/Ambedkarites people since they are the ones who do not accept Hindu's way of life, their domination and barbarism. Instead, due to the teachings of Dr Ambedkar and Buddha, they resist, retaliate and take them head on unlike the other untouchable's caste that still continue to follow Hinduism and are very submissive and helpless in dealing with the caste Hindus and their unjustified and inhuman activities. The neo Buddhist in other parts of India like Karnataka, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Bihar and Tamilnadu are also targeted on trifling issues by the caste Hindus in a systematic manner. Maharashtra, the home state of Dr Ambedkar is one of the most progressive and industrially developed state in western part of India. However The state has witnessed the worst heinous kind of atrocities against the Neo Buddhist in the recent times, the most famous the Khairlanji incident On 26 September 2006 in which four members of a Buddhist family including mother and daughter were brutally butchered by the caste Hindus.

Review of Literature

The Neo Buddhist Movement in India under the leadership of Dr Ambedkar claimed the legacy of Shakyamuni Gotama Buddha. He was the first according to Dr Ambedkar and his followers who fought a lifelong battle against the caste system or Brahmanism. This is the general opinion of the neo Buddhist Laity in Maharashtra. In the year 2013 a Burmese Monk Ven. Pandita who lives in Srilanka visited India and was asked to deliver a public speech on Buddha's social thought in Pune city.⁶ In his address he opined that Buddha never cared for the society...he was not a social reformer but worked for the individualistic perfection of man and asked his disciples to live at secluded places, away and isolated from the society and attained your solvation from the samsara. This is a typical orthodox worldview of Theravada Buddhism, cherished by many of the Therwadi Bhikkhus. The pali canonical literature is extensively cited by the orthodox Buddhist monks to support their viewpoint. There are some other Buddhist scholars who openly refuted the claims made by them and argued that the Buddha's doctrine is basically and principally a social doctrine. The slogan Bahujan Hitay, Bahujan Sukhaya (For the Benefits of many, for the happiness of many) is often quoted by the scholars tilted to Buddha's social reformatory character.

⁵ This was a Maharashtra Government Sponsored study conducted in Jalana District of Maharashtra in the year 2007

⁶The lecture was organised at Pune University campus, Dept of Pali& Buddhist Studies, 2013 date not available

However, it will be interesting to take brief survey of the different viewpoints on these issues to make the things more clear. To begin with which caste a Buddha should belong to has not been revised in Buddhism up to the pre-sent day according to Ernst Waldschmidt⁷. He points out to the Lalitavistara which says: a Bodhisattva can by no means come from a lower or even mixed caste. The Bodhisattvas appear only in two kinds of lineage, the one of the Brahmanas and of the warriors (kshatriya) In which of the two high castes they were born depended on the fact which of the two had the better reputation at that particular moment. Lower castes have never had the chance to consider Buddha among them namely because they don't have a good reputation. Ernst Waldschmidt finally concludes that the preference of the kshatriyas and the Brahmins in ancient Buddhism leaves no place for doubtsthat Buddha and the so called impure castes were entirely separated from each other and Buddha had nothing to deal with the dalits and the downtrodden sections of the society.He also refers to Hans Wolfgang Schumann⁸who statistically proved that almost all of Buddha's disciples were high caste people and that the Brahmins comprised the majority of the Sangha. Consequently, to understand Buddha as a radical social reformer or even as a liberator of the Dalits, is an unhistorically backward projection of modern wishes on a typically religious authority. Especially social reformatory Neo-Buddhists in the East and West make use of such an ideological construct.⁹He asserted that no religion could destroy the Indian caste system throughout the history and hence the claims made by the Buddhist and Neo Buddhist do not withstands.

But Lal Mani Joshi¹⁰has altogether different views about the Buddha and his social revolution. He argues that there was a constant struggle between Brahmanism and Buddhism right from the days of the Buddha to the time of the effacement of Buddhism towards the beginning of the second Millennium. This struggle he argues is proved by the Pāli Texts, the Sanskrit Buddhist Texts, the Upaniṣads, the Dharma Sūtras of Brāhmaṇas, the Purāṇas, the philosophical treatises of bothtraditions and it is confirmed in some cases by archaeological evidence and foreign notices. This struggle according to him ended only with the exit of the Buddhism from the Indian scene.He even blames a famous Indologist Dr. Pandurang Waman Kane for misleading the people on this account.¹¹Anne M. Blackburn (1993) in his article Religion, Kinship and Buddhism: Ambedkar's Vision of a Moral Community observed that

⁷Ernst Waldschmidt(2001)

⁸Hans Wolfgang Schumann: Der historische Buddha, München 1992, cited by Edmund Weber, 2001

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰Lal Mani Joshi, (2008)

¹¹Dr P W Kane ignores the fact that Buddha had any disputes with Vedicas and Hindus on caste and Varna

Dr. Ambedkar looked at Buddha's struggle as an Indigenous cultural response to degraded Aryan society. The dominant society at the time of Gotama Buddha, according to Ambedkar, was a Brahmanical Aryan community leading a socially and religiously degraded way of life. Buddha led a revolution against the Brahmanical anarchy and was succeeded in containing the Brahmanism. To my mind this goes with the spirit and legacy of Dr. Ambedkar who had time and again argued that the history of India is nothing but the history of struggle between Brahmanism and Buddhism and vowed to retransform India into a Buddhist India in his life time, the dream he cherished till the end of his life. Birendra Nath Prasad ¹² cites N. N. Bhattacharya, who observed that even after decades of research there is no serious study of what Buddhism actually did in Indian History. To what extent could it transform the caste-based social order, patriarchal structure, and what was its relationship with the state? Now, one can strongly reject the observation made by N Bhattacharya who seems to be blind towards the historical contribution Buddha and his Dhamma have made to the world civilisation. It is because of the Buddhism that millions of excluded people in south Asia and more particularly India are living a dignified and respectful life after their conversion.

Valerian Rodrigues¹³ did not agree with the scholars who hold the opinion that by converting to Buddhism, Ambedkar did much harm to the secular project in India, reinforced obscurantism and sought a radical alternative to the conditions of Dalits in India. He believed that Dr Ambedkar thought that modernity, as an invention of human reason, science and mode of interaction, cannot endure without being anchored in religion. This marks him off from most of the significant thinkers in the West and draws him close to some of the thinkers on modernity in India such as Aurobindo, Iqbal and even Gandhi who all invoked a certain centrality to religion under conditions of modernity. When subjected to such a scrutiny, Ambedkar thought Buddhism scores over other religions. Therefore he thought that Buddhism comes closest to be the religion for our age, the age of modernity. It is not merely the 'religion of the oppressed or an engaged and emancipatory religion which of course to an extent it was, but something that is in tune with man's deepest and most profound striving.¹⁴ According to Dutch scholar Koenraad Elst, (2001) Neo-Buddhism is a mistake. For him, DR. Ambedkar opted for Buddhism mostly on the wrong assumption that Buddhism was an anti-caste reform movement. (2001, 11.9) In contrast to the Buddha as social reformer that Ambedkar paints Elst argues that the Buddha "was quite unambiguous about

¹²Birendra Nath Prasad (2006)

¹³Valerian Rodrigues (2011) in Dr Ambedkar on Modernity and Religion

¹⁴ Ibid

the futility of worldly pursuits turn away from the world to focus on spiritual exercises. Walpola Rahula¹⁵ emphatically denied the image of the socially removed Buddhist. He argues that those who think that Buddhism is interested only in lofty ideals, high moral and philosophical thought, and that it ignores the social and economic welfare of people, are wrong. The Buddha was interested in the happiness of the people. To him happiness was not possible without leading a pure life based on moral and spiritual principals. But he knew that leading such a life was hard in unfavourable material and social conditions. Rahula points to places in the Pali scriptures where the Buddha is recorded as teaching that one need not become a renunciant to attain high spiritual states, that particular minimum material condition, that the society should provide, are favourable to spiritual success.

Neo-Buddhism Response to Caste Hindus in Modern India

In his introduction of the Indian constitution to the Constituent Assembly, Dr B R Ambedkar makes clear his view that caste is the primary obstacle for India to become a unified nation. He said:

“I am of opinion that in believing that we are a nation, we are cherishing a great delusion. How can people divided into several thousands of castes be a nation? The sooner we realize that we are not as yet a nation in the social and psychological sense of the world, the better for us. For then only we shall realize the necessity of becoming a nation and seriously think of ways and means of realizing the goal.... The castes are anti-national. In the first place because they bring about separation in social life. They are anti-national also because they generate jealousy and antipathy between caste and caste. But we must overcome all these difficulties if we wish to become a nation in reality. For fraternity can be a fact only when there is a nation. Without fraternity, equality and liberty will be no deeper than coats of paint.”¹⁶

In Dr Ambedkar's model Dalit social and individual transformation is to be achieved through three related tactics. First, political participation through legislation and the electoral process a system he helped design as the architect of the Indian constitution. Second, economic advancement through educational improvement and third, rejection of Hindu religion and conversion to a rationalized and socially engaged Buddhism.¹⁷

¹⁵WalpolaRahula(1985)

¹⁶Speech given by Dr B R Ambedkar in Constituent Assesbly in 1949, reproduced by Ahluwalia 1977 recited by Seth Joshu Josephson (2011)

¹⁷Ibid

Educate, Agitate and Organised

This is the famous ‘mantra’ (formula) given by Dr Ambedkar to his followers. Ambedkar’s each word spoken and written is a command to millions of people in India. His advised that education is a milk of tigress and whoever drinks will roar. He himself was an example for them. He was the most educated Indian of his time and till today here is no one to challenge his educational might. It is because of these that the Neo Buddhist community is most educated community in India. They are next to Christians as far as educational advancement is concern. Because of their educational development they were able to enter into government services. Today, Neo Buddhist have largest numbers IAS officers amongst all the other religious minority and non-converted Hindu Dalits. The highly qualified Buddhist youths are settled in different countries all over the world and are fighting the cause of their fellow brothers either individually or collectively by the name various Ambedkarites International organisations like Dr Ambedkar International missions. The Ambedkarites in UK were instrumental in bringing Equality law¹⁸ in England and indications are coming that it wil soon be a reality. The Act is held up by the powerful upper caste Hindu lobby operational in UK. The change brought out by the education can be ssen even in the rural areas also. This has given sleepless nights to the caste Hindus. Their frustrations and discomfort is manifested in the form of increase in violence and atrocities against the Neo Buddhists living in rural areas. Table below shows the picture of Maharashtra state in 2014.

Table No. 3 Incidents of Caste Conflicts Resulting in the Brutal Killings of Buddhist/Dalits in Maharashtra during the year, 2014¹⁹

Month/2014	District	No of Incidents of Murders	Name of the Victim
3 April, 2014	Jalana	1	ManijKasab
25 April, 2014	Aurangabad	1	UmeshAage
28 April, 2014	Ahmednagar	1	Nigtin Age
2 May , 2014	Pune	1	ManikUdage
22 May, 2014	Gondia	1	Salve
3 October, 2014	Ahmednagar	3	Jadhav Family
21 October, 2014	Ahemadnagr	2	Chavan Brothers

¹⁸This law is just like a prevention of atrocity Act in India, if passed by the UK parliament, the discrimination by the upper caste Hindus in UK with the Dalits in UK will become an criminal offence.

¹⁹Figures compiled and published by city based NGO, Dalit-AdivasiAdhikarAandolan, Pune(Maharashtra)

Marx or Buddha

Dr. Ambedkar was greatly fascinated by the Philosophy of Karl Marx and Buddha. Both of them were talking about the 'Dukkha' in the world. Even though goals are same, to end the sufferings and reconstruct the society on the basis of equality, liberty and justice, the means are totally different. For the communist, change is not possible without violence. Violence is an indivisible part of Marxists Philosophy whereas Buddha's philosophy is based on Non-violence. Use of force was never acceptable to lord Buddha, Dr Ambedkar choose to follow the path of Buddha because the dictatorship of any kind was not acceptable to a true democrat Dr Ambedkar. He lived for democracy. He firmly believed that Buddha has answer to Karl Marx. The communist themselves believe that their theory of state as a permanent dictatorship is weak.²⁰ According to communist theory state will wither away because nothing can be sustained merely by force. Dr Ambedkar argues that the only things that can sustain after the force is withdrawn is religion. But to the communist religion is anathema. Ambedkar found that their hatred to religion is so deep that they will not even discriminate between the religion which are helpful to communism and the religion which are not. Their objections to the religions is that they makes people other worldliness and made them suffers poverty in this world. Such a charge cannot be level against the Buddhism because it does not promises heaven to the weak and the poor instead encourages them to acquire property in a lawful way.²¹ He drew our attention to the wonderful achievement of the communist Russia and warns that humanity does not only want economic values, it also wants spiritual values....man needs material comfort...but man must grow materially as well as spiritually, but communist philosophy consider man no better than pigs.²² That is how he evaluated the two great men and accepted Buddha as his Guru.

Organisational Response: Expansion of Neo Buddhismamongstother Middle Caste and Low Caste Hindu.

The Neo Buddhist Movement was so far limited to the Mahars in Maharashtra, Chamars or Jatavas in UttarPtadesh, Malas in Andhra Prdesh , Paswan in Bihar and Meghawal community in Rajasthan. They were the staunch Ambedkarites but it has now finding its echoes in some other caste mostly the other backward caste in Maharashtra and some other states. Now a days the two parallel home coming (Gharwapsi) programmes are

²⁰Ambedkar B R in Buddha or Karl Marx(1987) P,459-460

²¹ Ibid

²²Ibdi, P, 462

running by the Hindu under RSS²³ brining the Christian and Muslims back to Hinduism. There are two more movements of conversions initiated by the middle caste OBC²⁴Hindus and Low caste Dalit Hindus to convert themselves toBuddhism. Very recently more than 80,000 Hindu Dalits in Gujrat, Kota District were converted to Buddhism so as to escape the day today conflicts at the hands of savarna Hindus. The two prominent campaign that are going on for bringing back all the backward caste into their original Buddhist fold are ‘OBC on the Path of Buddha’²⁵ and second campaign is Chalo Buddha Ki Ore (Lets Go to Buddha)²⁶

Political Response

Republican Party of India was the political wing floated by Dr Ambedkar. It became operational immediately after his death and had huge success in 1957 general election and state assembly elections of different states including Maharashtra. the party own 29seats in all over India including 17 MLA seats in Maharashtra,²⁷ the largest number of Neo Buddhist MLAs ever got elected at any time in the history of Neo-Buddhist movement. In the Parliamentaryelections also 9Members of parliaments were elected throughout India. RPI candidates P. T Borale became the first Mayor of Mumbai in the same year.²⁸ After that the politicalgraph of the Republican Party went down and ultimately culminated into the formation of Dalit Panther in 1980’s. It was a kind of a militant organisation in line with the Black Panther in South Africa to physically protect the Neo Buddhist from the violence and atrocities perpetuated by upper caste Hindus in villages and cities, Dalit panther splits after doing a remarkable work till the end of 1980’s on the issue of ideology. There were two camps one having a tilt towards the Marxism and the other towards Buddhism. The Neo Buddhist Political power remained divided into different factions after 1990 in Maharashtra but the new party BahujanSamaj Party(BSP) having ideological based of Dr Ambedkar resurged in North India under the leadership of ShriKanshiramji who was groomed as a leader in Maharashtra by the fellowAmbedkarites in Pune. The party had a tremendous success in Uttar Pradesh and BahanMayavati became the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh for the fourth times so far. Even today, it has more than 100 MLAs and is major opposition party in UP state assembly. Apart of these there are many political parties, their factions and sub-

²³RashtrySwayamSevakSangh established in 1925 is a Hindu fascists Organization.

²⁴ Other Backward caste Movement now becoming a religious movement just like Neo Buddhist

²⁵ Its campaign run by Satyashodhak OBC movement Under HanumantUpare, in Maharashtra

²⁶ It a campaign run by a prominent Hindu Dalit Adv, Kolikar to Convert HinudDalits into Buddhisam.

²⁷J v pawar(2002) Vol. 1

²⁸Ibid.

factions operational in Maharashtra and all over India. All of them have Ambedkar, Buddha and Mahatama Phule as their icon and ideologue but no missionary zeal for the cause Dr Ambedkar dedicated his entire life.

Conclusions

Caste violence, atrocities, discrimination, deprivation, untouchability and exclusions these are the major sources of the conflicts between the High caste Hindus and the minority Buddhist/Neo-Buddhist. The Neo Buddhist are becoming more and more assertive due to their educational advancement and economic development. The legacy of Buddha and Dr Ambedkar never allows them to take up arms in their hands and fight out the cause, instead, following the footsteps of Buddha and Dr B R Ambedkar their responses to the societal conflicts are continued to be in a democratic framework. The constitution of India is the powerful instrument of the social change if implemented in a right spirit, But unfortunately it is not. The Buddha Dhamma Movement is now occupying the empty political space and more and more people mostly youth is getting attracted towards the Dhamma. This is a welcome step for bringing Dhamma Raj in India in days to come.

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