

Fourth Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Annual Lecture

LIBERTY, EQUALITY, COMMUNITY

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's vision
of a New Social Order

Delivered by

GAIL OMVEDT

Kasegaon, Nasik, Maharashtra



**Dr. Ambedkar Chair in Sociology
Centre for the Study of Social Systems
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Jawaharlal Nehru University
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PREFACE

Social order of any sort necessarily imbibes in it a ranking—rating or putting one over the other—of objects or attributes or, even groups or communities of people. A social order may be relatively either rigid or flexible, depending on its normative structure, values and ideological orientation. This also means that a relatively flexible social order found at a given time may become rigid, if not completely then it at least remains less dynamic at another point in time. It is also possible that a relatively rigid or less flexible social order may not accord approval specially of those who envisage a new social order for the betterment of humanity or a larger segment of it. This is most appropriately found in the case of those who strongly believe in and strive for equality, liberty and fraternity or *maitree* (friendship) among the humankind, if not in absolute then at least in relative sense. Their such belief and urge for a new social order is undoubtedly governed by the fact that those, being deprived and neglected in the existing social order, would inevitably be bestowed on social dignity, self-respect and liberty or even equal opportunity in the new social order that ought to emerge.

Dr. Ambedkar has been one such, rather the most profound, visionary of a new social order not only for India but for all societies in the world. Though he never mentioned about it explicitly in the case of the latter, yet it was well implied. His vision of a new social order was based on equality, liberty and fraternity about which he was greatly fascinated by one of the several proclamations adopted by the French

4 Liberty, Equality, Community

National Assembly during the 18th century. This was evident from his speech delivered in 1927 during the *Mahad Satyagraha* at the Chavadar tank in Mahad taluka of Nasik district in Maharashtra. Later on, he spelt out the meanings of these concepts in his *Annihilation of Caste*—the well argued but undelivered speech for the conference on the Jati-Pati Jodak Mandal to be held at Lahore (now in Pakistan)—yet published in 1936 itself. In fact, it was the *Annihilation of Caste*, in which for the first time, he pointed out the difficulties in the conceptual understandings of equality, liberty and fraternity, and their full and proper endorsement by a given society to embrace a new social order—just in both theory and praxis. Then, he reflected quite elaborately, in his later writings and speeches, not only on the various dimensions of the concepts of equality, liberty and fraternity which, for him, were the basic principles of a new social order but also traced their roots in ancient India and aspired for their adoption, rather, re-adoption in an ideal society to be evolved in future through the strict adherence to the constitutional provisions and moral commitment of the people to that.

The Fourth Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Annual Lecture was delivered by Dr. Gail Omvedt on 23 March 2000. In her scholarly lecture titled Liberty, Equality, Community:

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's Vision of a New Social Order, Omvedt has summarised Ambedkar's vision along three main points. One, Ambedkar's acceptance of human history as a history of progress—a forward movement, and his views on 'the role of idealism and (historical) materialism in human life and social structure; two, his economic and political philosophy forwarded in the 'form of social liberalism' or state socialism, and; three, his vision of a new social order translated and founded as well 'with his version of Buddhism, a "liberation theology" of Buddhism—a *Navayana Buddhism*'. The text of her lecture, presented here verbatim, is an interesting reading for the students of sociology and social anthropology, economics, history, political science, and religion, especially Buddhism. The reader may, however, get baffled on two points: the term 'community' in place of fraternity, and the term

'Navayana Buddhism'. While replacing the term rather well defined concept of fraternity with the term (and not the well—defined concept) community, she makes a passing remark that the latter 'captures for our gender—concerned times the real meaning of the final term' (fraternity). No doubt, in academic discourse the term community has undergone change in its original connotation, and is applied these days for agglomeration of people—either of the same gender or across the gender or of any hue. In other words, community has lost its holistic connotation and is reduced to a narrow one, whereas the term fraternity has broad, rather, universal connotation cutting cross the caste, race, creed, gender, and even artificially created geo-political boundary of nation—state or citizenship.

Similarly, the British Government of India Act 1935 has accepted Buddhism, like Jainism, and Sikhism, a sect of Hinduism. Dr. Ambedkar in his *Buddha and His Dhamma* has taken a holistic view of the teachings and philosophy of the Buddha to cater to the religious need of the humanity in the modern time. For him, both the Buddha and His Dhamma were rational yet not averse to the material needs of the humankind but with full compassion of an individual for others. It is true that he has not taken note of two schools—*Mahayana and Heenayana* which could also be accepted as two sects crept later in Buddhism. Hence, to treat his understanding of the Buddha and His Dhamma as Navayana puts one in somewhat uncomfortable position as it places it in the similar classification whereas Buddhism in terms of its being Dhamma (duty with compassion) exists as a single unified religious entity. Anyway, a scholar is free to provide his/her own interpretation of a term, and it is readers who are the best judge to accept or reject it. The text of the lecture is quite lucid and adds academic inputs to the literature already available on the theme. I hope the readers would like it.

April 14, 2004

Nandu Ram
Dr. Ambedkar Chair
Professor of Sociology

LIBERTY, EQUALITY, COMMUNITY Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's vision of a New Social Order

Gail Omvedt

It is truly an honour to be given the opportunity to deliver the fourth Dr. Ambedkar memorial lecture of the new century and the new millennium. Though this is officially the 4th Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Annual Lecture for the Year 1999, it has been very fortunately postponed to the year 2000! Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's vision and life truly stands at the junction of the old and the new; coming from the depths of the society marked by hierarchies of inequality and involuted complexities of fixed exploitation to a leading role in the formation of a new order, symbolized by his role in the drafting of India's Constitution, symbol of a new order, Ambedkar was indeed a man marking the beginning of an era, a man whose life and thought encompassed analysis of both, rage about and struggle against the old exploitation and the visions of the new society. Whether or not the Constitution and the India that emerged from the struggle for freedom and equality truly represents Ambedkar's vision is a separate question; today, I would like to focus on exactly what that vision was.

These are days of both assessing the past millennium and laying out our hopes and visions for the new one. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Ambedkar is here India's most

significant figure. While names of Indira Gandhi and Mahatma Gandhi have been taken around the world as important figures of the millennium, it is not they nor any other of the rather bewildering collection of Indians mentioned (including Godse and Bacchan!) but Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar who has to be considered India's man of the millennium. Already awareness of the significance of Dalit and the role of Dalits in Indian society is spreading, and in the future when people look back on the traumas and changes that Indian society has undergone, and at the contributions its people have been making to global society, they will agree that it is Babasaheb who best represents the global-Indian heritage. Nehru was a national figure at most; his daughter Indira was also a national figure. Mahatma Gandhi was indeed a global figure, who is recognized throughout the world today as a forerunner of the ecological movement. But Babasaheb's harsh judgment in 1939—"this Gandhi age is the dark age of India" (Vol. I : 352), I think will stand: the values that Gandhi represented, the proclamation of Hinduism and the glorification of a village society, in whatever idealized form, were ultimately backward values, the values of a pre-modern society. It was Babasaheb who stood within the Indian tradition of modernism, justice, freedom and equality and who gave the ideals of the French revolution local form and shape. I am using strong words here because the debate over these values is raging sharp and fierce today in India, because Babasaheb Ambedkar himself used strong words and took sharp positions on the issues involved—issues of development, freedom and equality.

Ambedkar's vision of a new social order can be summed up in the way in which he so often did, with the great slogan of the French Revolution, "liberty, equality, fraternity." I would change the final term to "community" because I think it captures for our gender-concerned times the real meaning of the final term. Liberty, equality and community are the three most important components of a human vision for the new millennium.

In using these, I am quite aware that these great values of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution are today under

8 Liberty, Equality, Community

attack. They are under attack not only in India from advocates of pseudo-swadeshi who would see them as merely "western" but also world-wide, from post-modernists and eco-romanticists who think "progress" is impossible, and from Leftists who have taken "liberalism" and "liberty" as bad words. It is important to assess this attack and Ambedkar's response. Part of this response has to do with the Indian context of his efforts. For this context was not only a heritage of caste inequality and oppression. It was also, and even more importantly, a heritage of Buddhism and other Indian traditions which Ambedkar saw as the beginnings of modernity, equality, liberty and community for India. In this sense, the values that the French Revolution helped to give a world-wide push to are not really "western" at all, but world values. It is perhaps not accidental that "Enlightenment" is also a Buddhist term, perhaps with some different meanings. *Prabuddh Bharat* was the name Ambedkar gave to his final weekly newspaper, after *Janata*, after *Bahishkrut (Bahishkrit) Bharat*. It was not only an equalitaritarian, free and fraternal India that he sought to achieve, but also an enlightened one, an India of rationality and science—an India true to its own heritage in linking with the most developed ones of Europe and elsewhere.

I will focus on three main points to summarize Dr. Ambedkar's vision of a new social order.

First, in contrast to the Gandhian and eco-romanticist position, Ambedkar shared with Marx and with liberal Enlightenment thinkers a belief in progress, a conviction that the history brought with it an advance in human welfare. In Marxist terms, we can interpret this as the advance of the forces of production which brings with it an advance in human capacities; in liberal terms, we can speak of an advance in freedom. Ambedkar also believed that human history is a history of progress, a forward movement and not simply a phase in endless cycle or final degeneration. He differed with Marx in interpreting the motive force of human history, so that it is also necessary to examine Ambedkar's views regarding the great debates on the role of idealism and materialism in human life and social structure.

Second, in today's India, indeed in the world, when Nehruvian statism is yielding to liberalism as a method and philosophy of economic development, it is necessary again to characterize Ambedkar's economic and political philosophy. This I would describe as a form of social liberalism and I will briefly trace his writings on economics and socialism, and conclude with a look at his thinking in the final years of his life, expressed mainly in his essay "Buddha and Karl Marx."

Last but not least, I would like to examine Ambedkar's religious contributions, which are both at the practical level and at the level of philosophy. Here, we must deal with his version of Buddhism, a "liberation theology" of Buddhism or more accurately, a Navayana Buddhism.

Ambedkar's Conception of History : Materialism, Idealism and Human Progress

Is there such a thing as "progress" or "historical development"? At one time, it would have been surprising to even ask such a question. The greatest heritage of revolutionary values has been the belief that humans are emerging out of slavery, out of poverty, into a world that offers an improvement in human existence. It is still perhaps the confidence of the majority of humanity: millions greeted the stroke of midnight last December 31 and the new dawn of January 1 in the hope and confidence that the new millennium would bring, no necessarily a utopia, but at least a better world than existed earlier.

Yet, in recent years the confidence that progress is possible has come under attack. Eco-romanticism, taking its justification in India from Mahatma Gandhi, tends to see history as heading into a downspin. We hear everywhere rhetoric of greater and greater destruction. Human progress is no longer possible, even desirable. As the influential eco-feminist Maria Mies has put it, the French Revolution is finished: its ideals cannot be extended to Dalits, women or other sections of the marginalized in this world, and we must turn away from the vain effort to achieve "growth" to acceptance of a society based on limited needs, subsistence production and stasis (Mies, 1986; Mies and Shiva, 1989).

Such ideas have a very wide spread today, not simply in India but just as much if not more in the U.S. and Europe. They reverberate even in some western interpretations of Buddhism. For instance, Sangharakshata—in spite of his similarities with Ambedkar at other points—sees a radical distinction between social and spiritual evolution, arguing that

“...the line of biological development is not single but double. Every step in the evolutionary process results from a coalescence between an upward movement of material progress and a downward movement of psychic or spiritual degeneration” (1957 : 60)

The Evolving Mind, a more nuanced book by another English member of the same order, also makes a distinction between material and mental evolution, arguing that Buddhism carries on a process of spiritual evolution while biological evolution comes to an end (Cooper, 1996). Cooper seems to assume that historical development or social evolution has little to offer; human evolution will now take place at the spiritual and mental level only. Recently influential “eco-romanticist” themes also tend to contrast the aggressiveness; individualism and urge to domination over nature which are said to be characteristic of the western or “Judaean-Christian tradition” while the eastern philosophies are said to be less individualist, less aggressive and more universalistic in seeing humans as only a part of nature.

Ambedkar himself always affirmed a faith in progress and the movement towards a socially just society, and never showed the slightest tendency to be attracted by a simplistic “east-west” distinction. He gave a very early answer to the romanticisation of a pre-industrial life and to the morality of “simple needs” in a 1918 essay reviewing a book by Bertrand Russell.

“This time-honored complaint of the moralists against ‘love of money’ is only a part of their general complaint against the goods of the world and finds its justification in the economic circumstances which gave rise to this particular belief.... At a time when the whole world was living in ‘pain economy’ as did the ancient world and when the productivity of human labour was extremely low and when no efforts could augment its return, in short, when the whole world was living in poverty it is but

natural that moralists should have preached the gospel of poverty and renunciation of worldly pleasures only because they were not to be had..." (Vol. 1 : 490).

This marks Ambedkar's refusal to glorify poverty in any way and his rejection of attempts to idealize an "eastern" pacifism and harmony with nature as contrasted with "western" aggressiveness and commercialism. In opposition to an ethic of subsistence and limiting needs, he urges the development of human productivity and the accumulation of wealth; he also goes on to cautiously distance himself from the condemnation of property so common to radicals and romanticists: "The trouble therefore one might say is not with property but with the unequal distribution of it" (Vol. 1 : 491). This position he retained lifelong; for his final writings on Buddhism distinguished it clearly from what he considered to be the glorification of poverty in Christian tradition.

Ambedkar, like Marx, is against exploitation, but not against development and accumulation. At a social level, he believes in progress in history, and at an individual level he gives legitimation to the honest and energetic efforts of "householders" to work and earn. Development, meaning an increase in human wealth and capacities, is very much affirmed—though we have to remember that "wealth" mean not simply material goods (though Ambedkar would not reject this) but also artistic and scientific achievements. Ambedkar's own writings also show an evolutionary and "stagist" view of history. For instance, in his early essay on "Philosophy of Hinduism", he analyzes religions as associated with particular types of societies which he categorizes in a series: "savage societies", "antique civilized societies" and "modern civilized societies" (Vol. 3: 3-22). This is a social evolutionary model, though different from the more economically based versions offered by Marx or more conventional sociologists.

History, then, does show us progress. What is its the motive force? Or, put in another way, what plays the basic role in determining social structure and conditioning human actions? This, of course, is the great question of sociological and historical materialism versus idealism (or pluralism); and basic positions

1998), though he has an implicit and very significant sociological theory, he was not a trained sociologist or historian, and does not spend any time developing or explicitly stating his methodology. If he had done so, he would probably have said, as Max Weber did, that he was emphasizing the role of ideas primarily as a corrective factor. Just as Weber spent much of his professional life in debate with Marxist methodology and socialist ideas, so Ambedkar did also.

Not only do all of his writings show a concern for logic, Ambedkar was seriously concerned to have a rigorous scientific method. Thus, his discussion of karma in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* links it to causality. Though he stresses "mind" as central, even in this, his final and important work, his orientation is very much towards the material world.

Even in his rejection of Marx, Ambedkar—who was never one to use words sloppily—rejects the "economic interpretation" as the "only explanation", he never denies the role of material factors and economic impulses as a necessary part of any overall historical and social explanation. This would be Weber's position. Similarly, his emphasis on the role of Brahmanism in India is linked to the statement that religion is uniquely important to Indian history. Ambedkar's philosophy of history is consistent with a pluralistic explanation of history, though not of a purely materialistic one.

Ambedkar's Political Economy: Social Liberalism

Throughout his life, it was the values of the French Revolution' liberty, equality and fraternity (community), summed up in "social justice", which defined Ambedkar's orientation. However, his specific economic thinking can be said to have gone through three major stages (see also Omvedt, 1999).

The first phase is represented by his writing of the 1920s, which include two major books—*The Problem of the Rupee* and *The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India*—and a number of articles. Ambedkar was trained in classical economics under eminent economists of the time, and his writings show the way to which he kept up with recent theory, though he tended to

reject much of Keynesianism. In regard to the Indian currency debate, he argued for a low rupee (against British interests and pressure for a high rupee), though one that would, as he saw it, balance the interests of workers (wage-earners) with those of capitalists and other entrepreneurs. His study of the effects of British policy in India is consistent with most nationalist critiques of British rule, in particular condemning the ways in which the British government was running India in the interest of British manufacturers. "While the land tax prevented the prosperity of agricultural industry, the customs taxes hampered the manufacturers of the country. There were internal customs and external customs, and both were equally injurious to trade and industry" (Vol. 6: 75). However, he believed that once such biased customs duties and taxes were lifted, India could and did make economic progress with the expansion of commerce and trade, and he felt that the "flow of capital into the country" (i.e., foreign investment) was necessary for industrial diversification (Vol. 6: 361, 423). These convictions and his dislike of deficit financing and concerns for responsible government spending would be welcomed by those trying to rationalize and liberalize the Indian economy today. However, while he believed in the potential of the market and trade for increasing individual and national wealth, this by no means meant a neglect of the role of the state; his economic writings were devoted almost entirely to state policy, which assumed a crucial role for the state in guiding the economy, not to mention maintaining welfare (see Ambirajan, 1999; see also Jadhav, 1991 and Thorat, 1998 for important analyses of Ambedkar as an economist).¹

However, the 1930s did usher in a second phase of Ambedkar's economic thinking. By then he had become heavily involved in social movements not only of Dalits but also of workers and peasants generally, and with this he came into contact with Indian communists and, in many ways, came under the influence of Marxism. This never really left him. It was during this period that his weekly *Janata* was filled with articles urging the unity of "peasants and workers" against "capitalists and landlords"; that he made his famous Mahad statement

characterizing the enemies of Dalits as "capitalism and Brahmanism."

In many ways, his economic and political thinking of this phase can be characterized as a form of what feminists used to describe as "dual systems" theory. Just as early socialist feminists in the U.S. talked of "capitalism and patriarchy" or Black radicals of "capitalism and racism", so Ambedkar began to focus on "capitalism and Brahmanism." These, in a famous speech at Mahad in 1938, he said,

"There are in my view two enemies which the workers of this country have to deal with. The two enemies are Brahmanism and Capitalism... By Brahmanism I do not mean the power, privileges and interests of the Brahmans as a community. By Brahmanism I mean the negation of the spirit of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. In that sense it is rampant in all classes and is not confined to the Brahmans alone, though they have been the originators of it" (reported in *Times of India*, February 14, 1938).

In taking these Brahmanism and capitalism as the focus of struggle, Ambedkar was inclined to accept a Marxist explanation of social-economic exploitation with only the necessity of adding an appreciation for the role of caste as an autonomous, exploitative and oppressive social structure. This meant, in effect, taking Marxism as the theory with which to analyze capitalism and supplementing it with an analysis of caste focusing on religion and ideology. This period climaxed with the proclamation of the need for "state socialism" in *States and Minorities*. It is this Ambedkar of *States and Minorities* who is usually cited today by various types of socialists and Marxists as justification for their own position.²

However, a "dual systems" approach to a theory of society and history is ultimately inadequate,³ and Ambedkar moved away from it. In fact by the late 1950s, it would seem that he was already coming to a rejection to a Marxist approach to economic issues—leave alone criticizing its inadequacy on social issues. The tumultuous political events of the time, mirrored in Ambedkar's continuing lead in Dalit struggles for equality and liberation, led to his this third and final period, which I would describe in terms of a search for a "Buddhist economics." As

Ambirajan has rightly pointed out, this is not the "Buddhist economics" of "small is beautiful", rather, in his final essay on "Buddha or Karl Marx," Ambedkar returns to an appreciation of the role of the private accumulation of wealth (i.e., of the "market" in conventional economic terms) and gives us a reinterpretation of state, market and community through a Buddhist parable. The householder, striving to increase his wealth honestly and forthrightly, provides the foundation of the economy. The king, symbolizing the state, has the necessary role of ensuring against the poverty of the most oppressed—poverty which would result in chaos or revolution if he did not intervene. Finally, the Bhikku Sangh represents community, the ideal communist society (Vol. 3: 453-459).

In spite of these shifting phases, there is no doubt that Ambedkar's political-economic philosophy was a form of liberalism. He was an individualist and a rationalist, returning always to the basic Enlightenment values linked to Indian tradition. To take one important statement, in elaborating the morality of modern society, he argues that while in "antique society" the moral code laid down by religion is based on utility, in "modern society" it is based on justice—which he later defines as equivalent to the values of liberty, equality and fraternity:

"Utility as a criterion was appropriate to the Antique World in which, society being its end, the moral good was held to be something which has social utility. Justice as a criterion becomes appropriate to the Modern World in which the individual being the end, the moral good was held to be something which does justice to the individual" (Vol. 3: 22).

But if Ambedkar's political-economic philosophy can be characterized as liberalism, what kind of liberalism was it? In an important essay, Ralf Dahrendorf has discussed the three main types of liberalism—classical liberalism, social liberalism and neoliberalism (Dahrendorf, 1987: 183-187). In classical liberalism, the liberalism of Adam Smith, John Locke and others, the individual is posed at the center of society; the state is justified only because it protects the life, liberty and property (or in terms of the American Declaration of Independence, the "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness")

of individuals. But this form of liberalism landed historically and logically into contradictions: if the claim to property is justified, as Locke did, by the fact that individuals have put their labour into it, and if the existence and power of the state is justified as protecting "life, liberty and property"—then what can be said of a society characterized by the division between those who possess inherited property and those who do not? What of the existence of propertiless and impoverished individuals who do not even have the opportunity to acquire property by honest labour? How can the state or the right to property be justified in fact in terms of human rights and human values in the face of existing inequalities? Volumes have been written on this by liberal philosophers; but we can simply point out here that the contradiction between inherited inequality and human rights can only be resolved if we admit an important role of state intervention (or collective human intervention in various forms) to establish equality—or if we seriously weaken the effort to establish and provide equal rights for all individuals. The first is the way of social liberalism (and there are many forms of this), the second of neoliberalism.

Ambedkar was a social liberal in this sense, as is (to take one important example), India's Nobel prize winner Amartya Sen. He focused on state policy, including state welfare policy, arguing for its role in reducing poverty and compensating for or correcting conditions of social injustice. Whether or not this led him towards socialism (and I don't think socialist liberalism is a contradiction in terms!) is a matter of our definition of socialism. Throughout most of his life Indian communists and socialists, including those in Congress, had identified socialism with state control, and it is not unlikely that Ambedkar was becoming disillusioned with this, that he was critical of Indian leftists not only for their attitude towards caste, but for their unwillingness to accept constitutional democracy. Towards the end of his life, he was apparently seeing himself more as a "social democrat" than as a "state socialist".

This can be seen in his speech presenting the Constitution in which he had played the major role in drafting. There he

makes several important points which deserve to be emphasized today. For example, he quotes Thomas Jefferson to emphasize in inherent right to change the Constitution.⁴ Jefferson had argued that every generation had the right to create a new Constitution for itself, if it felt necessary; to refuse this right would mean that "the earth belongs to the dead and not to the living". Ambedkar cites this, adding, "what Jefferson has said is not merely true, but is absolutely true". However, he says, there will never be a need to reject India's Constitution as such, because of its flexible scope for amendment (Vol. 13:1211).

Then, he turns to a warning about the danger to democracy in India. Here he argues first that agitation and satyagrahas should be given up in favour of parliamentary methods of trying to achieve change (in other words, he would be very sympathetic with current concerns that hartals and bandhs have gone too far!). But this is followed by an even more important appeal: that the main dangers to the existence of India as a democratic nation come from inequality, from casteism, which is a negation of India's existence as a nation, and from the tendency to worship "mahatmas" and yield to authoritarianism. It is in regard to inequality, prefacing his famous warning that "those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy," that he makes his eloquent statement of social democratic values:

"We must make our political democracy a social democracy as well. Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the basis of it social democracy. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life" (Vol.13: 1216).

Finally, he concludes with stating that the "down-trodden classes are tired of being governed, they are impatient to govern themselves. This urge for self-realization in the down-trodden classes must not be allowed to develop into a class struggle or a class war ... That would indeed be a day of disaster" (1217-18). Ambedkar profoundly believed that problems of inequality and exploitation could be resolved without recourse to class warfare ... And this led him to Buddhism.

Ambedkar's Religious Views: Towards "Navayana" Buddhism

It has become familiar by now to note that in leading millions of ex-Untouchables to Buddhism, Ambedkar was singlehandedly responsible for the revival of Buddhism as a mass religion in the land of its birth—roughly a millennium after its disappearance. This would itself be a considerable feat.⁵ What is usually not recognized, however, is that Ambedkar did not simply "revive" a traditional form of Buddhism; he also took up the task of reinterpreting and rejuvenating Buddhism as a religion, or "teaching", for the contemporary world.

Ambedkar's concern for establishing Buddhism as the religion of Untouchables comes from two convictions. First, he believed that religion, in the broadest sense of a transcendental morality, is necessary for ordered social existence; and, second, from his belief that what was known as "Hinduism" (probably the term "Brahmanism" would be more appropriate)⁶ could not serve this purpose. Both themes were present from very early. His earliest essay on religion, "The Philosophy of Hinduism" already presents his condemnation of Brahmanism; from almost the beginning we can see his sharp awareness that Dalits needed a new religion. And, though there was a period in which he seemed to waver, when for instance he argued in his challenge to Gandhi that Hinduism could be acceptable if "all the shastras and puranas were given up, "the condition is so rigorous as to be unacceptable. Babasaheb was a born rebel against both the traditional forms of brahmanic varnashrama dharma and the reconstructed Hinduism pioneered by Vivekananda and Gandhi from the 19th century onwards.

In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, he not only tried to present Buddhism for the masses of ex-Untouchables who followed his lead, he also put forward what I have called a "liberation theology" of Buddhism.⁷ In one of his most important last essays, "Buddha and Karl Marx", Ambedkar had posed Buddhism against Marxism, seeing Buddhism as a solution to the problems of exploitation that Marxism posed. But this is

not simply an attack on Marxism, it works the other way also: Buddhism answers, according to Ambedkar, specifically "Marxist" questions, that is, its concern is not so much the problem of religious meaning as the problem of exploitation.

Thus, Ambedkar's *The Buddha and His Dhamma* radically challenges some of the basic tenets of Buddhism as it has traditionally existed, whether in Theravada or Mahayana or Vajrayana forms. This is clear from his introduction itself, which presents four basic problems that Ambedkar sees in traditional versions of Buddhism.

Ambedkar, first, rejects the traditional version of Siddhartha's Parivraja or "going forth", arguing that the story of being moved by the sight of a dead person, a sick person, and an old person was impossible to believe since such sights must have been known to anyone.

Second, he claims that the "four Aryan truths"—sorrow (dukh), the origin of sorrow, the cessation of sorrow, and the way to the cessation of sorrow⁸—are not part of the original teaching of the Buddha. "This formula", he states flatly, "cuts at the root of Buddhism. If life is sorrow, death is sorrow and rebirth is sorrow, then there is an end of everything... The four Aryan Truths are a great stumbling block in the way of nonBuddhists accepting the gospel of Buddhism."

Third, he asserts that "a terrible contradiction" exists between the doctrines of karma and rebirth, and the Buddha's denial of the existence of the soul.

Finally, he claims, that the Bhikku can only be the "hope of Buddhism" if he is a social servant and not a "perfect man".

Ambedkar's project in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* is to resolve these problems. First, in regard to the Parivraja, he argues that Siddhartha left his home to prevent a war between his Sakya clan and the Koliyas over water. The cause is social, not religious. And, after his initial wandering, on hearing that the Koliyas and Sakyas have after all made peace, Gautam determines to continue his renunciation and search, because

"The problem of war is a problem of conflict. It is only part of a larger problem. This conflict is going on not only between kings

and nations but between nobles and Brahmans, between householders, between [friends and family members]... The conflict between nations is occasional. But the conflict between classes is constant and perpetual. It is this which is the root of all suffering in the world. I have to find a solution to this problem of social conflict" (57-58).

Second, in regard to the doctrine of dukkha, sorrow or suffering, Ambedkar argues that it is not a necessary characteristic of the existing world, and in fact the purpose of Buddhism is to end suffering in this world. [Here he links this with a denial that Buddhism is pessimistic]. The Buddha says in his first sermon, "No doubt my Dhamma recognizes the existence of suffering but forget not that it also lays equal stress on the removal of suffering. My Dhamma has in it both hope and purpose. Its purpose is to remove Avija, by which I mean ignorance of the existence of suffering. There is hope in it because it shows the way to put an end to human suffering." And in even stronger words, the five Parivrajakas greet this first sermon by saying, "never in the history of the world has salvation been conceived as the blessing of happiness to be attained by man in this life and on this earth by righteousness born out of his own efforts!" (Vol. 11: 130-131). Here, and throughout *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar makes very strong assertions that Buddhism is a religion (or a "dhamma") that can resolve the problems of social and natural suffering.

Third, he tries to resolve the contradiction between rebirth and the absence of a soul by interpreting karma in a socio-biological sense. The Hindu idea of karma is based on the soul and includes transmigration of soul; since Buddhism asserts that there is no soul, its idea of karma must be radically different. There is thus a similarity in words but a radical difference in meaning (Vol. 11:337-8). Ambedkar interprets this to argue that the Buddhist conception involves rebirth, but not "transmigration", and the difference is that transmigration asserts a nonmaterial soul which is the subject of transmigration and to which karma clings, while rebirth can be interpreted in a biological and materialistic form. Ambedkar asserts that the Buddha's whole discussion of the idea was in

the context of biological-genetic inheritance and environment; that the Buddha did assert some genetic heredity but believed that environmental influence was more (Vol. 11:338-344). Karma or Kamma basically refers to "causation" and more specifically to laws (niyamma) governing the social and moral order.⁹

"The theory of the law of Kamma does not necessarily involve the conception that the effect of the Kamma recoils on the doer of it and there is nothing more to be thought about it... individuals come and individuals go. But the moral order of the universe remains and so also the law of Kamma which sustains it" (Vol. 11: 244).

The fourth major innovation in Ambedkar's (interpretation of) Buddhism was to treat the Bhikku Sangha as an organisation for social service. The fact that the Sangha was not acting so, in his experience, was to him a major block to accepting any of the already existing forms of Buddhism. (His introduction expresses his feeling that the journal of the Mahabodhi Society, at that the major organ propagating a revived Buddhism in India, was simply "dull reading". Sangharkshata's account in his study of Ambedkar and Buddhism mentions another important fact; though founded by the great Sri Lanka Buddhist Anagarika Dhammapala, the Mahabodhi Society in India was dominated by Brahmans; specifically at the time of Ambedkar's conversion, Shyama Prasad Mookherjee was its chairperson!¹⁰ He also records the fact that at the time of conversion, Ambedkar was reluctant to take the third of the "three refuges", i.e., to accept the authority of the Sangha, and that in effect he rejected the distinction between bhikku and layman by himself administering the oath of conversion to the lakhs of Dalits in attendance) (Sangharakshata, 1986).

The Dhamma: Beyond Religion to Reconstructing the World

Ambedkar's Buddhism, often called Navayana Buddhism, or the "Fourth Way" in contrast to the three traditional ways of Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana, is based on a very important sociological understanding. By the time of his choice

of Buddhism, he was distinguishing the Buddhist *dhamma* from *religion* itself, that is from Christianity, Islam, Hinduism or whatever else is classified as "religion". His argument can be upheld, if we accept western-biased dictionary definitions of religion which normally include reference to a "faith in god". Clearly Buddhism, which rejects notions of god and the soul and stresses rationality and experimentation, was quite different. If we define religion in a Durkheimian way—a set of beliefs and practices considered sacred which link a community of believers¹¹ and which has now influenced the entire sociology of religion, Buddhism would be called a religion. It is noteworthy that Ambedkar insists that Dhamma is not only morality, but "sacred" morality. Ambedkar's emphasis on the role of Dhamma in society is very reminiscent of Durkheim: society needs Dhamma (or any religion with a moral basis) for social order, or as he puts it, "an instrument of Government."

"Society has to choose one of three alternatives. Society may choose not to have any Dhamma as an instrument of Government... This means Society chooses the road to anarchy. Secondly, Society may choose the police, i.e. the dictatorship as an instrument of Government. Thirdly, Society may choose Dhamma plus the Magistrate wherever people fail to observe the Dhamma. In anarchy and dictatorship liberty is lost. Only in the third liberty survives. Those who want liberty must therefore have Dhamma" (317).

Other religions also serve as a basis for social order, even Brahmanic Hinduism only, as Ambedkar constantly stresses, supports an unjust and exploitative social order. How then does conventional religion differ from Dhamma? It is in summing up this that the Marxist strains in Ambedkar appear:

"The purpose of Religion is to explain the origin of the world.
The purpose of Dhamma is to reconstruct the world" (322).

This is very clearly an echo of Marx and consciously so; for Ambedkar had rephrased Marx's point, one of these he considered the "residue of fire" that remained of Marx, as "The function of philosophy is to reconstruct the world and

not to waste its time in explaining the origin of the world' (Vol. 3:444).¹² Again we see that Ambedkar's last and culminating project was to ask Marxist questions, but give Buddhist answers.

Thus, while he has earlier and elsewhere used "religion" generally to include Buddhism, and within that distinguished Buddhism from other religions. In his final formulation, he identifies the Buddhist Dhamma as something that is basically different from other than religion.¹³ Religions, in the language of some sociologists of religion, provide a "canopy of meaning" that normally includes theses about the origin of the universe for humans, usually their creator and so forth. They require faith. Morality is a secondary product of these theses about the universe and this faith. According to Ambedkar, the result of this is that for religions (or non-Buddhist religions, depending on how the term is used), morality is only a secondary offshoot, "it is a wagon attached to it... attached and detached as the occasion requires" (322)). In contrast, Buddhism works by reason and the Dhamma is pure morality, but a sacred morality. Because it is sacred, i.e. placed beyond the ability of individuals to change it, it can regulate the social order.

Ambedkar's stress on rationalism in Buddhism is strong. To him, the person who accepts Buddhism does so as a free individual and is convinced that this is the way; in fact, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* says almost nothing of the "three refuges", the main "statement of faith" of the Buddhist believer. Ambedkar takes it upon himself to give his own interpretation of Buddhism in the way of almost a charismatic religious leader. Ambedkar does give us a rationale for this. In arguing for Buddha's own rationalism, in stating that any contrary interpretation that seems to be in the text was a Brahmanical insertion, he offers a simple methodology for understanding them:

"There is, however, one test which is available. If there is anything which could be said with confidence it is: He was nothing if not rational, if not logical. Anything therefore which is rational and logical, other things being equal, may be taken to be the word of the Buddha" (350-51).

Conclusion

It goes without saying that Ambedkar's vision of a new social order was that of a society without castes, without gender inequality and without class exploitation. He gave the most thought during his lifetime, and this thought was embodied in struggles as thoroughly as that of Marx or any other radical visionary, to the question of caste. It was in regard to caste that he stressed the role of Brahmanism in creating conditions of exploitation in Indian society, and it was in regard to caste that he had very specific suggestions for its eradication: rejection of Brahmanic Hinduism and intermarriage were the two main points he stressed in "Annihilation of Caste" in 1936 (Vol. 1:64-96). Other measures which he fought for, including reservations, rights to land, separate village settlements, and so on were designed to help the exploited and oppressed to raise themselves within the system; they were steps towards eradication of caste. However, the full annihilation of the system required a new sacred morality to bind human beings in a society of equality (hence, the destruction of Brahmanism) and intermarriage to the point where it was no longer possible to even identify which "caste community" a person really belonged to. Steps in this direction would also, he was convinced, create crucial conditions for women to achieve equality.

Ambedkar's vision for a new world—a world of social justice, of liberty, equality and community for all—is founded in a unique philosophy, a unique form of religious thinking. "Dhamma"—earlier described as a form of "liberation theology" but it is important to consider the differences between this and Christian liberation theologies. First, the latter generally simply borrow from Marxism (note on this); Second, recent Christian theology redefining the notion of God, speaking of the "historical Jesus", still hang on to transcendence and orthodox thinking. Paul Tillich, for instance, may have defined God as the "ground of Being", but this turns to a Brahmanic Hindu interpretation of God, not to a Buddhist rejection of the entire notion of God. And in stressing the humanness of the Buddha is different from the "historical

Jesus"—Ambedkar is right in claiming, in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, that the Buddha did not make the same type of claims for himself that Jesus did, to be a "divine being". (The Buddha did make certain claims, that he was beyond the status of being "a man"—but this was something attainable by others).

Ambedkar's political and economic philosophy is also a unique form of radicalism. Most radical activists (including Christian liberation theology) have generally borrowed from Marxism (or from some forms of eco-romanticism) in developing their economic theory. Ambedkar, though he had a sustained confrontation and engagement with Marxism for many decades, did not in the end do this; his economics were much more flexible and his training in economics provided a more sound basis, ultimately, from which to give a political-economic theory. Here also it is helpful that, with all his engagement with Marxism, he did not have to turn to it as an alternative "world-view" or semi-religious ideology. His version of Dhamma provided a kind of substitute for Marxism in sustaining and incorporating the effort and belief to reconstruct the world, but it did not need to do this through a particular time-bound analysis, not tied to particular time-bound interpretations of "capitalism". Ambedkar was more free to understand capitalism or whatever we may call the modern economy. Those who self-consciously call themselves Marxist are in many ways handicapped in confronting the 21st century, third millennium and information age because, in spite of the genius of Marx himself, he could not predict all of this. This would not be a problem if Marxists took Marx at his word, that he himself was not a "Marxist", or genuinely treated it as a science not a dogma. But this does not happen; Marxism continues to be taken as a dogma. Ambedkar was free of this. He himself also did not, could not foresee the information age, the new technology that confronts us; he did not foresee the crash of "state socialism" and the discrediting of its Nehruvian form in India. But it is certain that he would have dealt with these issues in a very different way. It is certain that Ambedkar, who considered himself heir to the great traditions of both east and west, would have welcomed

globalization—though he would have fought its negative aspects. It is also certain that he would have been part of a liberalizing trend, though like Amartya Sen and others, with a concern for maintaining and even developing the welfare state.

Ambedkar could also not have foreseen the degree to which the environmental question has taken on urgency today. However, it is also certain that he would have been concerned about environmental destruction which has its worst impact on Dalits, Adivasis and Bahujans, and it is equally clear that he would have dealt with it in a very different way from the "eco-romanticists"¹⁴ dominant in environmental movements today. He would not have idealized traditional caste society and its "subsistence production"; he would not have declared that Adivasis or others knew no such thing as famine before the coming of commercial society; he would not have imagined that farmers in dry lands could survive without any external water or that agricultural production could have been raised only through local rainwater harvesting; and he would not have rejected the accumulation of wealth and development of human capacities that development and modern technology and science make possible. He made a major contribution to planning of large irrigation projects, and his comments on the Damodar Valley project and the Hirakud dam on the Mahanadi river in Orissa make it clear that he saw the need to develop them as multipurpose projects, not simply to deal with flood problems but also with irrigation, electricity and navigation (see Thorat, 1998). He would have been urging "sustainable development" and not a romanticist rejection of industrial development.

Would Ambedkar's Buddhism be acceptable to other Buddhist believers? That is a question for all of them to answer! Few religious people are willing, initially, to accept a fundamentally new "path" in their faith—which is what Navayana Buddhism is. Nevertheless, it continues to guide the aspirations of millions of ex-Untouchables and other converts, and it has been hailed by many, for instance Christopher Queen, as an example of "engaged Buddhism"

which has correlates in many other Buddhist countries. It is undoubtedly a Dhamma appropriate to the search for social justice and a rational, equalitarian, human society in the new century, the new millennium.

NOTES

1. Ambirajan (1999) argues that his early writings must be the main ones for classifying his economic philosophy, since this was the period in which he actually wrote as an economist, though his economic observations are pertinent throughout his life. In fact his final "Buddhist economics" also reflects the concerns of these early studies.
2. Marxist interpretations of Ambedkar, it must be noted, began with an early classification of him as a liberal or "bourgeois liberal" (and with this the pre-independence Communist document strongly condemned him). In more recent times with efforts at accommodation and cooptation, he is spoken of as a "revolutionary democrat" (there would be no objection to this except that any kind of democrat is inferior, in traditional Marxist classification, to a socialist!). The attempt is, however, to take the *States and Minorities* as representing Ambedkar's economic positions and to ignore his early economic writings and his later Buddhist-oriented work.
3. There are many reasons for this inadequacy: a dual systems theory gives no way to connect the structures of caste and capitalists, and it tends to identify capitalism, as explainable by the Marxist theory of economics, as the more causally important "base", while caste and other factors are seen as the "superstructure" and thus of lesser importance.
4. Quite likely a scholar of his caliber was also conscious of the fact that in authoring America's Declaration of Independence, the American agrarian democrat has changed the French slogan "liberty, liberty and property" to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"—a change that Americans themselves often ignore.
5. Properly speaking, this should not be referred to as a "conversion" since Ambedkar and others did not consider that Dalits had a proper religion to begin with; rather they spoke of dhamma dikhate taking the "vows of religion". Dalits were not converting from an old religion to a new one, they were entering into religious life which Hinduism had not given them before.
6. "Brahmanism" is more accurate in the sense that "Hinduism" as a name for a religion was a 19th century construction; previous

even the proponents of the religion had referred to sanatani dharma or to various sects within it such as Vaishnavism or Saivism. "Hindu" derives from a geographical term and was used nearly until the time of the British to refer to all the inhabitants of the country.

7. The term "theology", of course, is misleading and western-biased, since it reflects a belief in god, or a "theology".
8. The more usual translation of dukkha is as "suffering". Sangharakshata gives these as the Truth of Suffering, the Truth of the Origin of Suffering, the Truth of the Cessation of Suffering, and the Truth of the Way to the Cessation of Suffering (Sangharakshata, 1986: 10-11). "Aryan" has, of course, nothing to do with the ethnic group but here means simply "noble".
9. A recent "Hindu" attempt to reinterpret karma is made by Sharma (1997: 23-40); but it has to struggle somewhat to insert a notion of collectivity and a rejection of caste hierarchy—aspects which Ambedkar could find very easily in Buddhism!
10. Vasant Moon's *Vasti* gives an account of the two Brahmans who did the work of the Mahabodhi Society in Nagpur. The account is respectful and appreciative, but makes it clear that their approach was to interpret Buddhism as a part of Hinduism, and that Ambedkar was so highly distrustful of them that he was ready to change the place of conversion (the dikshabhoomi in Nagpur) when told that its bhoomipujan had been performed at the hands of one of them; he relented only when he was convinced that this was not true.
11. Durkheim gave Buddhism as one example to indicate that there were "religions" in his sense which were atheistic. Thus, his analysis of religion (Durkheim 1965) emphasized the "sacred" and the function of binding a community together, and was also consistent with his belief that a future socially just and equalitarian society would need a religion, though a rational one. In this sense, Durkheim's views on religion were closer to those of Ambedkar than either Marx or Weber. Durkheim's definition has now become commonly accepted among sociologists; see for instance Giddens who defines religion as involving "a set of symbols, invoking feelings of reverence or awe, which are linked to ritual practiced by a community of believers" (Giddens, 1996: 270).
12. Marx's own famous wording was, "Philosophers have only interpreted the world differently. The point, however, is to change it" (Theses on Feurbach).
13. This distinction is also made by Buddhists such as Sangharakshata (1986).
14. In India, this trend can be described as "Brahmanic

environmentalism", for its failure to appreciate the needs of the masses of rural people for water provided by large-scale irrigation projects, and for its romanticization of a traditional society that was caste-bound and hierarchical.

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