

Buddhism, Democracy and Dr. Ambedkar: The Building of Indian National Identity

Milind Kantilal Solanki, Pratap B. Ratad

Assistant Professor, Department of English, KSKV Kachchh University, Bhuj, Gujrat, India

Research Scholar, Department of English, KSKV Kachchh University, Bhuj, Gujrat, India

Abstract— Today, people feel that democratic values are in danger and so is the nation under threat. Across nations we find different systems of government which fundamentally take care of what lies in their geographical boundaries and the human lives living within it. The question is not about what the common-man feels and how they survive, but it is about their liberty and representation. There are various forms of government such as Monarchy, Republic, Unitary State, Tribalism, Feudalism, Communism, Totalitarianism, Theocracy, Presidential, Socialism, Plutocracy, Oligarchy, Dictatorship, Meritocracy, Federal Republic, Republican Democracy, Despotism, Aristocracy and Democracy. The history of India is about ten thousand years and India is one of the oldest civilizations. The democratic system establishes the fundamental rights of human beings. Democracy also takes care of their representation and their voice. The rise of Buddhism in India paved the way for human liberty and their suppression from monarchs and monarchy. The teachings of Buddha directly and indirectly strengthen the democratic values in Indian subcontinent. The rise of Dr. Ambedkar on the socio-political stage of this nation ignited the suppressed minds and gave a new hope to them for equality and equity. India got independence in the year 1947 and became one of the democratic nations. The new value system gave equal opportunities to all Indians despite of their gender, caste or religion. The present paper discusses the rise of Buddhism and the democratic values present in Buddhism. It also discusses the efforts of Dr. Ambedkar in establishing democratic system in India. It also encompasses the result generated through religion of the Buddha and Dr. Ambedkar to restore the democratic structure again in India.

Keywords— **Buddhism, Democracy, Ambedkar, Humanism, Equality, Equity, Liberation.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Human beings have developed culture and religion and thus are different from other organisms. Religion is as old as our understanding to grow together in groups. We started our race in groups and then gradually we developed various methods, rules and regulations which could govern those groups. So we can say that the social bodies or the governing bodies are older than religious rites or norms.

Buddhism is a religion and dharma that encompasses a variety of traditions, beliefs and spiritual practices largely based on original teachings attributed to the Buddha and resulting interpreted philosophies. Buddhism originated in Ancient India sometime between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE, from where it spread through much of Asia, whereafter it declined in India during the Middle Ages. Two major extant branches of Buddhism are generally recognized by scholars: Theravada (Pali: "The School of the Elders") and Mahayana (Sanskrit: "The Great Vehicle"). Buddhism is the world's fourth-largest religion, with over 520 million

followers or over 7% of the global population, known as Buddhists.

The Rise and Development of Buddhism

Buddhism is an Indian religion attributed to the teachings of the Buddha, supposedly born Siddhartha Gautama, and also known as the Tathagata ("thus-gone") and Sakyamuni ("sage of the Sakyas"). The details of Buddha's life are mentioned in many Early Buddhist Texts but are inconsistent, and his social background and life details are difficult to prove, the precise dates uncertain. The evidence of the early texts suggests that he was born as Siddhartha Gautama in Lumbini and grew up in Kapilavasthu, a town in the plains region of the modern Nepal-India border, and there he spent his life in what is now modern Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Some of the stories about Buddha, his life, his teachings, and claims about the society he grew up in may have been invented and interpolated at a later time into the Buddhist texts. Dhamek Stupa shrine in Sarnath, India, built by Ashoka where the Buddha gave his first sermon.

According to the Buddhist sutras, Gautama was moved by the innate suffering of humanity and its endless repetition due to rebirth. He set out on a quest to end this repeated suffering. Early Buddhist canonical texts and early biographies of Gautama state that Gautama first studied under Vedic teachers, namely Alara Kalama (Sanskrit: Arada Kalama) and Uddaka Ramaputta (Sanskrit: Udraka Ramaputra), learning meditation and ancient philosophies, particularly the concept of "nothingness, emptiness" from the former, and "what is neither seen nor unseen" from the latter. Finding these teachings to be insufficient to attain his goal, he turned to the practice of asceticism. This too fell short of attaining his goal, and then he turned to the practice of dhyana, meditation, which he had already discovered in his youth. He famously sat in meditation under a *Ficus religiosa* tree now called the Bodhi Tree in the town of Bodhi Gaya in the Gangetic plains region of South Asia. He gained insight into the workings of karma and his former lives, and attained enlightenment, certainty about the Middle Way (Skt. *madhyamā-pratipad*) as the right path of spiritual practice to end suffering (*dukkha*) from rebirths in *Samsāra*. As a fully enlightened Buddha, he attracted followers and founded a Sangha (monastic order). Now, as the Buddha, he spent the rest of his life teaching the Dharma he had discovered, and died at the age of 80 in Kushinagar, India.

The history of Indian Buddhism may be divided into five periods: **Early Buddhism** (occasionally called pre-sectarian Buddhism), **Nikaya Buddhism** or Sectarian Buddhism: The period of the early Buddhist schools, **Early Mahayana Buddhism**, **later Mahayana Buddhism**, and **Vajrayana Buddhism**.

Buddhism may have spread only slowly in India until the time of the Mauryan emperor Ashoka, who was a public supporter of the religion. The support of Ashoka and his descendants led to the construction of more stupas (Buddhist religious memorials) and to efforts to spread Buddhism throughout the enlarged Maurya empire and into neighbouring lands such as Central Asia, beyond the Mauryas' northwest border, and to the island of Sri Lanka south of India. These two missions, in opposite directions, would ultimately lead, in the first case to the spread of Buddhism into China, and in the second case, to the emergence of Theravada Buddhism and its spread from Sri Lanka to the coastal lands of Southeast Asia.

The Rise and Development of Democracy

Democracy, in modern usage, is a system of government in which the citizens exercise power directly or elect representatives from among themselves to form a governing body, such as a parliament. Democracy is

sometimes referred to as "rule of the majority". Democracy is a system of processing conflicts in which outcomes depend on what participants do, but no single force controls what occurs and its outcomes.

The term appeared in the 5th century BC, to denote the political systems then existing in Greek city-states, notably Athens, to mean "rule of the people", in contrast to aristocracy, meaning "rule of an elite". While theoretically these definitions are in opposition, in practice the distinction has been blurred historically. The political system of Classical Athens, for example, granted democratic citizenship to free men and excluded slaves and women from political participation. In virtually all democratic governments throughout ancient and modern history, democratic citizenship consisted of an elite class until full enfranchisement was won for all adult citizens in most modern democracies through the suffrage movements of the 19th and 20th centuries. Democracy contrasts with forms of government where power is either held by an individual, as in an absolute monarchy, or where power is held by a small number of individuals, as in an oligarchy. Nevertheless, these oppositions, inherited from Greek philosophy, are now ambiguous because contemporary governments have mixed democratic, oligarchic, and monarchic elements. Karl Popper defined democracy in contrast to dictatorship or tyranny, thus focusing on opportunities for the people to control their leaders and to oust them without the need for a revolution (Popper 53)

The Rise of Ambedkar and his doctrine

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (14 April 1891 – 6 December 1956), popularly known as Babasaheb, was an Indian jurist, economist, politician and social reformer who inspired the Dalit Buddhist movement and campaigned against social discrimination against Untouchables (Dalits), while also supporting the rights of women and labour. He was Independent India's first law minister, the principal architect of the Constitution of India and a founding father of the Republic of India. Ambedkar was a prolific student, earning doctorates in economics from both Columbia University and the London School of Economics, and gained a reputation as a scholar for his research in law, economics and political science. In his early career he was an economist, professor, and lawyer. His later life was marked by his political activities; he became involved in campaigning and negotiations for India's independence, publishing journals, advocating political rights and social freedom for Dalits, and contributing significantly to the establishment of the state of India. In 1956 he converted to Buddhism, initiating mass conversions of Dalits. In 1990, the Bharat Ratna,

India's highest civilian award, was posthumously conferred upon Ambedkar. Ambedkar's legacy includes numerous memorials and depictions in popular culture. Around 1950, he devoted his attention to Buddhism and travelled to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) to attend a meeting of the World Fellowship of Buddhists. While dedicating a new Buddhist vihara near Pune, Ambedkar announced he was writing a book on Buddhism, and that when it was finished, he would formally convert to Buddhism. He twice visited Burma in 1954; the second time to attend the third conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Rangoon. In 1955, he founded the Bharatiya Bauddha Mahasabha, or the Buddhist Society of India. He completed his final work, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, in 1956 which was published posthumously. After meetings with the Sri Lankan Buddhist monk Hammalawa Saddhatissa, Ambedkar organised a formal public ceremony for himself and his supporters in Nagpur on 14 October 1956. Accepting the Three Refuges and Five Precepts from a Buddhist monk in the traditional manner, Ambedkar completed his own conversion, along with his wife. He then proceeded to convert some 500,000 of his supporters who were gathered around him. He prescribed the 22 Vows for these converts, after the Three Jewels and Five Precepts. He then travelled to Kathmandu, Nepal to attend the Fourth World Buddhist Conference. His work on *The Buddha or Karl Marx* and "Revolution and counter-revolution in ancient India" remained incomplete.

II. CONCLUSION

Dr. Ambedkar was asked to write a message for journal *Harijan* by Gandhiji, and a statement was sent to him stating,

If this doctrine of utmost superiority and utmost inferiority, descending from father to son eternally, is an integral part of Hinduism...then I no more want to belong to it than does Dr. Ambedkar. But...there is no superiority or inferiority in the Hinduism of my conception. (Gandhi 113)

Dr. Ambedkar was a staunch advocate of equality and democratic values. His vision of the untouchables and women was different from his contemporaries. In the democratic structure, all the stake holders play very vital and equal part and so Dr. Ambedkar argued,

The right of representation and the right to hold office under the State are the two most important rights that make up citizenship. But the untouchability of the untouchables puts these rights far beyond their reach. In a few places

they do not even possess such insignificant rights as personal liberty and personal security, and equality before law is not always assured to them. These are the interests of the Untouchables. And as can be easily seen they can be represented by the Untouchables alone. They are distinctively their own interests and none else can truly voice them...Hence it is evident that we must find the Untouchables to represent their grievances which are their interests and, secondly, we must find them in such numbers as will constitute a force sufficient to claim redress. (Ambedkar 296)

At times, we may feel democracy is a western creation and thus, Ambedkar imported it to this sub-continent. His creation, *The Indian Constitution* is the product of his encounters with the western thinkers and philosophers of Democracy. He rejected Hinduism just because of the social evil of caste system prevailing in it since centuries. Caste based system led to inequality in the society, whereas equality was inherent in Buddhism. Thus, to conclude these two different entities submerged into one and are responsible for the establishment of democratic values in Indian society. One religion and an individual sow the roots of this value system in the minds of common man of India and the fruits are sweeter than thought. India is World's largest democracy.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ambedkar, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches. Vol. 4. Mumbai: Education Department Govt. of Maharashtra, 1986. 1-17 vols.print
- [2] Gandhi, Rajmohan. *Why Gandhi Still Matters*. New Delhi: ALEPH Book Company, 2017.print
- [3] Popper, Karl. *The open society and its enemies*. Routledge, 2012.print