



Religious Pragmatic Thought of Dr. B R Ambedkar

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Introduction:

The confrontation between Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi regarding Hinduism and the place of the Dalits in Indian society is one of the most significant events in modern Indian history. Dr. Ambedkar, a leading social reformer and the principal architect of the Indian Constitution, famously declared, “I will not die a Hindu.” This powerful statement reflects his deep disillusionment with Hinduism, which he believed was inherently discriminatory towards the Dalits, or the so-called ‘Untouchables’. This essay explores Ambedkar’s confrontation with Gandhi on this issue, his critique of Hinduism, his embrace of Buddhism as a scientific and pragmatic religion, and the mass conversion of his followers to Buddhism.

1.Buddha as a Pragmatist.

Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, is often viewed through various lenses of spiritual, ethical, and philosophical. However, one of the most compelling perspectives is that of Buddha as a pragmatist. Pragmatism, a philosophical tradition that originated in the United States in the late 19th century, emphasizes the practical consequences of ideas as the key to their truth and value. While Buddha predated this formal philosophical tradition by over two millennia, his teachings exhibit a strikingly pragmatic approach to life and ethics.

Buddha’s Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path are clear examples of his pragmatic philosophy. The Four Noble Truths recognize the reality of suffering, its causes, and the possibility of its cessation. The Eight fold Path provides a practical guide for living a life that leads to the cessation of suffering. Buddha’s teachings do not dwell on metaphysical speculation but focus on tangible human experiences and the practical steps one can take to

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achieve liberation from suffering. This emphasis on practical, ethical living, and the avoidance of dogma or metaphysical speculation, is at the heart of Buddha's pragmatism.

1.2 Buddhism as a Scientific and Pragmatic Religion.

Ambedkar's disenchantment with Hinduism led him to seek an alternative that could provide a path to dignity, equality, and social justice for the Dalits. After years of exploration, he found this alternative in Buddhism. Ambedkar viewed Buddhism not just as a religion, but as a scientific and pragmatic philosophy that was compatible with modern values of rationality, humanism, and social justice.

In his study of Buddhism, Ambedkar was drawn to its emphasis on reason, ethics, and the rejection of the caste system. Unlike Hinduism, which he believed was steeped in superstition and ritualism, Buddhism encouraged a rational and ethical approach to life. It advocated for the equality of all human beings and rejected the idea of a hierarchical social order based on birth.

1.3 Ambedkar's Interpretation of Buddha's Pragmatism.

Dr. Ambedkar's engagement with Buddhism was deeply influenced by his recognition of Buddha's pragmatism. Ambedkar was drawn to the rational and ethical dimensions of Buddhism, which he believed were essential for creating a just and equitable society. In his views, Ambedkar presents Buddha as a reformer and pragmatist who rejected the ritualism, superstition, and caste hierarchy that characterized the Brahmanical Hinduism of his time.

Ambedkar was particularly influenced by Buddha's rejection of the caste system and his advocacy for a society based on equality and justice.

For Ambedkar, Buddha's approach to religion was profoundly democratic and rational. Buddha encouraged his followers to question authority, think critically, and rely on their own experience and reason rather than blindly following tradition. This pragmatic approach resonated with Ambedkar, who was himself a fierce critic of dogma and a proponent of rational inquiry. Ambedkar saw in Buddhism a philosophy that was not only compatible with modern values but also capable of addressing the social injustices that plagued Indian society.

2 Ambedkar's Confrontation with Gandhi (conflict of religious Interpretation between Ambedkar and Gandhi).

Dr. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi had fundamentally different approaches to addressing the issue of caste discrimination in India. Gandhi, while acknowledging the evils

of untouchability, believed in reforming Hinduism from within. He considered the caste system, in its ideal form, as a way of organizing society and argued for the eradication of untouchability without dismantling the caste structure. Gandhi referred to the Dalits as "Harijans," meaning "children of God," and believed in their upliftment through social and religious reform within the Hindu fold.

In stark contrast, Ambedkar viewed the caste system as an intrinsic and inescapable feature of Hinduism. He argued that the very foundation of Hinduism was based on the principle of inequality and that no amount of reform could change its fundamentally discriminatory nature. Ambedkar's views on Hinduism were shaped by his own experiences of discrimination and his extensive study of Hindu scriptures, which he believed sanctioned the oppression of Dalits.

The confrontation between Ambedkar and Gandhi reached its peak during the Poona Pact of 1932. Ambedkar had initially demanded separate electorates for Dalits to ensure their political representation and protection from upper-caste dominance. Gandhi opposed this, arguing that it would lead to the division of Hindu society. Despite Gandhi's opposition, Ambedkar stood firm in his demands. However, due to Gandhi's fast unto death, which put immense pressure on Ambedkar, he was forced to agree to a compromise known as the Poona Pact. This agreement provided for reserved seats for Dalits within the general electorate, but it was a compromise that left Ambedkar dissatisfied.

2.1 Gandhi and His Orthodox Thought:

Here Gandhi was following the orthodox line. Within the Hindu Mahasabha group, its spokesman was Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya. For this group, traditional Hinduism was sufficient and could be purged of caste, and they were not ready to accept Sikhism as a substitute. From 21 to 23 October 1936, in the eighteenth session of the Hindu Mahasabha in Lahore, the Shankaracharya as president put forth his position of supporting conversion to Sikhism if that was what untouchables desired. On the second day delegates from Uttar Pradesh led by Malaviya were refused recognition as representatives, and a scuffle broke out, with those supporting Malaviya walking out of the conference. Sikh spokesmen at the conference offered to welcome Dalit converts, saying, 'We beseech you to save the Depressed Classes from embracing either Christianity or Islam, for we cannot tolerate the idea of their adopting any foreign religion'. Divisions within the Hindu Mahasabha itself were thus being sparked by Ambedkar's call for conversion.

3.The Mass Conversion to Buddhism.

Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism was not an isolated event but a part of a larger movement. On October 14, 1956, in a historic ceremony in Nagpur, Ambedkar, along with hundreds of thousands of his followers, converted to Buddhism. This event, known as the "Dhamma Chakra Pravartan Din", marked the beginning of a new chapter in the history of the Dalit movement in India.

Ambedkar's conversion was a carefully planned and well-thought-out act. He had spent years studying the various religious options available before deciding on Buddhism. He chose Buddhism because he believed pragmatic religion like Buddhism, was the only religion that could offer a path to liberation for the Dalits. Unlike Hinduism, which he saw as oppressive, Buddhism offered a message of liberation, equality, and social justice.

During the conversion ceremony, Ambedkar administered the "Three Jewels" (Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha) and the "Five Precepts" to his followers, emphasizing that they were now Buddhists and no longer bound by the discriminatory practices of Hinduism. This mass conversion was a powerful statement of rejection of the Hindu social order and an affirmation of a new identity rooted in the values of Buddhism.

3.1 The Dhamma Chakra Pravartan:

Ambedkar's decision to convert to Buddhism was not merely a personal spiritual choice but also a socio-political statement. On October 14, 1956, in a grand ceremony at Nagpur, Ambedkar, along with nearly half a million of his followers, embraced Buddhism. This event, known as the 'Dhamma Chakra Pravartan' (Wheel of Dhamma Revolution), was a symbolic rejection of the oppressive caste system and a declaration of allegiance to a religion that promoted equality and compassion.

During the ceremony, Ambedkar led his followers in taking the Three Refuges (Buddham Sharanam Gacchami, Dhammam Sharanam Gacchami, Sangham Sharanam Gacchami) and the Five Precepts (Pancha Sila). This marked the beginning of a new spiritual and social identity for millions of Dalits who had long been marginalized and oppressed.

Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism, often referred to as 'Navayana Buddhism' or the "Buddhism of the New Vehicle" was distinct from traditional Theravada or Mahayana Buddhism. He reinterpreted the teachings of the Buddha to address the social realities of his time, particularly the issues of caste and social justice. Ambedkar's "The Buddha and His Dhamma" is a critical text in this regard, where he presents Buddhism not just as a religion but as a revolutionary social philosophy.

Ambedkar emphasized the need for a rational, ethical, and socially engaged Buddhism. He rejected the ritualistic and metaphysical aspects of traditional Buddhism and instead focused on its core ethical teachings and their applicability to the struggles of the oppressed. For Ambedkar, Buddhism was a tool for social transformation, a means to achieve the annihilation of caste, and a path to human dignity.

Conclusion :

The influence of Gautama Buddha's pragmatic philosophy on Dr. B.R. Ambedkar is profound and far-reaching. Buddha's emphasis on rationality, ethical living, and social equality resonated deeply with Ambedkar's own commitment to social justice and human dignity. Through his writings, particularly "The Buddha and His Dhamma", Ambedkar presents Buddhism as a rational and ethical alternative to the caste-based inequalities of Hinduism and as a foundation for creating a just and democratic society.

For Ambedkar, Buddha was not just a spiritual leader but a pragmatist who offered practical solutions to the social problems of his time. This pragmatic approach to life and ethics influenced Ambedkar's views on religion, society, and governance, leading him to embrace Buddhism as the path to liberation and justice for the oppressed Dalits. Ambedkar's legacy as a champion of social justice and human rights continues to inspire

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's confrontation with Mahatma Gandhi over the issue of caste and his eventual decision to convert to Buddhism represent a significant moment in the history of modern India. Ambedkar's critique of Hinduism as an inherently discriminatory religion and his embrace of Buddhism as a scientific and pragmatic religion were rooted in his deep commitment to social justice and human equality. The mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism under Ambedkar's leadership was not just a religious act but a powerful statement of defiance against the caste system and a step towards the creation of a more just and equitable society.

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