

**DR. AMBEDKAR'S BUDDHIST HUMANISM AND ITS RELEVANCE TODAY**

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**Abstract:**

*The mastermind behind the elephantine Indian Constitution took, on his own and out of conscientious necessity, a humanistic view at the time of shaping the constitutional cocoon which was the outcome of the culmination of his education, realization issued out of bitter reality, his very own wounded feelings and religious preference. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar did not hold back his views, and time and again, gave vent to them in his numerous letters, speeches, pamphlets, and books. Throughout his potent life, Dr. Ambedkar studied Buddhism and followed its instructions with a view to reflecting them in his own life and in the lives of the people around him. No wonder, this votary of egalitarianism embraced Buddhism in his ripe old age and wrote the glittering book *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, which got published posthumously. The present article chooses to pick out some pearls out of the book, which are, even today, dazzling enough to radiate relevant glow.*

**Keywords:** *Humanism, egalitarianism, buddhist philosophy, equality, tolerance.*

The incunabulum of humanism dates back to the gradual emergence of conscience in human psyche. Either in theism, or in atheism, and conjugated with both these opposite beliefs, i.e., in agnosticism; humanism has its elemental share. Though the term 'humanism' is broad in its implications, following all kinds of explications, it signifies, as Stephen Law puts it, 'little more than a system of thought in which human values, interests and dignity are considered particularly important' (1). Humanism incorporates rational approaches, and therefore, a humanist very often is found to be morally aligned and ethically riveted, holding a 'sceptical position regarding both gods and an afterlife' (2). Above all, humanism is said to champion the causes of humanity-it is only humans that matter.

Humanism, as a doctrine has been, *ab initio*, undergoing evolutionary processes and its hallmarks being moralism, rationalism, and ethics; it centres on humans and their values, needs, interests, abilities, dignity, and freedom. Secularism is another characteristic of humanism which has given it a modern politicized flavour. Despite the Greeks' polytheism, as Dupré specifies, Aristotle, in particular, typified their stand which held that human flourishing depended on people realizing their potential on earth by leading a life of virtue informed by reason. The Stoic philosophers too echoed the tenets of modern humanism in that they believed that man could attain inner contentment by harmonizing with nature and conforming with reason; which was, as they used to think, the organizing principle of the universe. Understanding the human condition sans divinity gained momentum from the fifteenth century, when Renaissance thinkers like Erasmus began to celebrate the essential dignity of mankind though they attempted to do so without rejecting God as their creator. The seventeenth century noticed tension between the religious and the humanist views as the scientific revolution gathered pace and Enlightenment thinkers challenged the authority of the Church to control the lives of its followers, proclaiming that people had the right to think and choose for themselves (85).

It is, therefore, justified to opine that any kind of humanism is non-existent without ethics, and

mankind is being drawn to those beliefs and preaching which are fraught with rationalistic, moral propositions and high ethical values. History has proved that whenever there happened to prevail glum in social or religious perspectives that appeared indigestible for the multitude, people overthrew those systems to usher in the new ones rich in ethical and moral standpoints and provided the impetus by rational scrutiny. In Indian context, the advent of Buddhism and Jainism can be taken into account. A good number of ills cropped up in Hinduism following the ninth century B.C. and in the sixth century B.C., people began to pine for a simpler religion which could be easily made suitable for them. This resulted in the rise of new sects in the form of Buddhism and Jainism. The common people, along with the patronizing of the rulers helped these new religions thaw. The causes were many. Chief among them were the complicated rituals in Hinduism, expensiveness, excess of animal sacrifices, predominance of the Brahmins and consequently the virulent caste system that played havoc in nurturing separation and exploitation of the lower rung of the Hindus, especially the Shudras.

Buddhism flourished much more with respect to Jainism which mainly confined itself within India. The following centuries saw the sustained propagation of Buddhism, both in India and abroad, owing to its light burden of customs, rituals, sound ethical standpoints, equality, easy-flowing egalitarianism, and most importantly, humanistic approaches. These drew the deprived and disgraced Hindu masses to its core and the same is continuing even today. During the post-independent period, the flux toward Buddhism was much maneuvered by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), the Chairperson of the Constitution Drafting Committee and the first Minister of Law and Justice (tenure: 15 August, 1947-September, 1951). His life reflects to be both the towering symbol of protest against age-old and contemporary forms of exploitation in India and a scholar-realist proposing humane terms of social co-existence. An untouchable himself, he led a resolute struggle against untouchability and attempted to formulate the terms of nationalist discourse in India. It is overly evident that Dr. Ambedkar was much influenced by both humanism and Buddhism and consequently, got enthralled by the Buddhist humanism and its ethical aspects. His *magnum opus* which got published posthumously, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1957) proves this point. Throughout his life, Dr. Ambedkar studied rather closely all religions, and later in his life, he embraced the Buddhism, along with being instrumental to mass-conversion to Buddhism which took place in Nagpur on 14<sup>th</sup> October, 1956. In that public ceremony, he converted about five lakh of his supporters gathered there. This incident, forsooth, laid a remarkable impact on the religious demographics of India. According to Dr. Ambedkar, Buddhism is the best religion because of its social, economic, educational, spiritual, ethical, and moral teaching. He chooses to assert, in his *The Buddha and His Dhamma* that after getting enlightenment following a protracted period of ascetic practice, Buddha happened to realize that it was 'hard for mankind to liberate itself from the entanglement of God and Soul', to give up its belief in rites and ceremonies and in Karma, and also to 'give up its belief in the immortality of Soul' for Buddha caught on the Soul as 'an independent entity which could not exist and could not survive after death' (111). Dr. Ambedkar was much enthused by the boundless appeal of egalitarian equality which he has tried to establish in the chapter 'What the Buddha Taught':

He should wish, may all beings be happy and secure; may their hearts be wholesome.

Whatever living being there be feeble or strong, tall, stout, and medium, short, small, or large, without exception; seen or unseen, those dwelling far or near, those who are born, or who are to be born may all beings be happy. Let none deceive another, nor despise any person whatsoever in any place; let him not wish any harm to another, out of anger or ill-will.... Let his thoughts of boundless love pervade the world, above, below and across, without any obstruction, without any enmity. (573)

Such expressions very much exude the deep-rooted humanism in Buddhist philosophy.

Dr. Ambedkar did not begin his political career focusing on religion, nor was he excessively given to shunning his own religion. His studied inclination was centred on economic and social issues. All the more, he belonged to a conventionally religious family. But, as it came to pass, religion got interwoven with Indian national identity rather distortedly due to colonialism, from the latter half of the nineteenth century. Despite the Indian National Congress' efforts to pose as a secular, multi-religious body; an all-pervasive construction of Hinduism did raise its tentacles during the said period, and Gandhi wanted to maintain an unchanged form of societal composition, keeping the caste-bound system intact. These factors, and his being insulted repeatedly in the hands of upper-class individuals aggravated Dr. Ambedkar's persistence to raise his voice and ability against oppressive class-stratification and casteism. Added to these was the liberal and top-class education that he received abroad for a long span of time. Born in 1891, Dr. Ambedkar had been a witness to several landmark incidents in national and world history. He was a witness to all the Satyagraha Movements of Gandhiji, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, martyrdom of innumerable Indian freedom-fighters, Indian independence attained after a horde of landmark incidents, the partition of the land and all-pervasive communal bloodshed associated with it. In the international context, he could feel the heat of several distressing events, including the World War-I and its horrible aftermath, the Russian revolution and the rise of Communism, the great economic depression during the twenties in the USA, the rise of dictatorship and the consequent Fascism and Nazism, the World War-II, Hitler's genocide of the Jews and Stalin's the Great Purge in the Soviet Union during the 1930s, the war in the Pacific expediting the Japanese expansion and the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by exploding atom bombs. All these happenings fatal to humanity reinforced Dr. Ambedkar to choose the path of peace and equanimity, sans emotion and religious customs. He studied many religions but in the end, Buddhism drew him into its fold; because of its message of equality, liberty, and peaceful co-existence, tempered by humanism.

The relevance of Dr. Ambedkar's vantage points along with what he wrote in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* is immense in today's scenario. Myriad and manifold as it is, we are being reminded of the appositeness, and therefore, the relevance in every sphere of our existence. The problems tend to vary with the change of ages, and according to Damien Keown, 'Buddhism is a response to what is fundamentally an ethical problem the perennial problem of the best kind of life for man to lead' (1). He further points out:

The expectation in Buddhism seems to be that ethical problems will be entirely resolved or 'dissolved' in the pursuit of the religious life. To this extent, Buddhist ethics is aretaic: it rests upon the cultivation of personal virtue in the expectation that as spiritual capacity expands towards the goal of enlightenment ethical choices will become clear and unproblematic. (2)

Dr. Ambedkar founded his philosophy of present action playing key roles to neutralize past and shape better future by the present toil. He negated the old notion pertaining to God and based his fundamental doctrine on intellectual, empirical, and scientific inquiry doing good to the humankind to rise on higher level of human dignity, equality, liberty of thought and fraternal bond between man and man. A life-long social crusader, Dr. Ambedkar played multiple roles in public life with the objective of rousing public conscience. Besides representing radical change, the movement of mass-conversion acted for the development of the downtrodden section of the society. This peaceful revolution through 'Dhamma' succeeded sufficiently.

As the Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee, Dr. Ambedkar could visualize the role and importance of national integration. He could understand that a powerful nation owes its existence to the amicable relations with the neighbour states and its internal majority-minority oneness. National integration solidifies with the resolution of all conflicts of its social groups. To him, national integration

meant nationalism, which entails the acquired habit of love and attachment for one's own land but that love of land did not mean hatred and hostility to the other section of fellow-countrymen. He could observe that India was segregated on account of religious, casteist, linguistic and regional differences. While communal forces were looming large upon the Indian communities, it was not justified to create communal provinces till the time they would come to feel that they were Indians first and identified by their respective communities afterwards. He believed in oneness among the Indians and to materialize the reciprocal love and solidarity of the nation, he incorporated Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles and Fundamental Duties for every citizen in the Constitution. His interest in humanity, his goal in achieving national concord and fraternal harmony among the countrymen and his making of constitutional rules and laws with a view to engaging justice turned him to be a great humanist, a noble rationalist and a confirmed nationalist.

Apart from his religious revolution and various social welfare movements, Dr. Ambedkar was an erudite and versatile person and one of the greatest builders of modern India. His contribution was not limited within the drafting of the Indian Constitution and forwarding a number of bills to the parliament. He tried to design a nation against the throes culled out of politico-ideological insularity and shortsightedness. In the truest sense of the term, he was a progressive radical whose tools were Buddhist humanism and rational application to dole out tolerance, peaceful co-habitation and common good of the people of India, in the main. Today's intolerance, despise preserved for the other and deep-rooted toxic feelings have all their medications stored in his ethically and morally hued Buddhist ideals. His endeavour to establish a liberal democratic political order in India can be discovered to have been made up by the following excerpt from a chapter entitled 'The Buddhist Way of Life: On Man, Mind and Impurities' of his *The Buddha and His Dhamma*:

The fault of others is easily perceived, but that of oneself is difficult to perceive; a man winnows his neighbour's faults like chaff but his own faults he hides, as a cheat hides the bad dice from the player.

If a man looks after the faults of others, and is always inclined to be offended, his own passions will grow, and he is far from the destruction of passions.

Refrain from all evil; cultivate the good; cleanse your own thoughts; this is the teaching of the Buddha. (361)

Perhaps this is the most apt counsel effluxed from Ambedkarian illustriousness to keep at bay the present turmoil and bigoted opinion all over the world.

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