

The Buddha and His Dhamma: Ashoka and Ambedkar

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Abstract: The teachings of Buddha had profoundly influenced the minds of Ashoka, the great Mauryan king and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, one of the makers of Modern India. Buddhism taught Prajna [understanding as against superstition and supernaturalism], Karuna [love] and Samata [equality]. It was the teachings of Buddha which imbued Ashoka and Ambedkar to follow his faith upholding the basic principles of Buddhism namely Non-violence, Toleration, Truthfulness, Equality and Social Justice.

Ashoka referred to Dhamma and its principles in many of his inscriptions such as Major Rock Edicts, Minor Rock Inscriptions, the Pillar Edicts. In his 2ND PILLAR EDICT, He defined Dhamma as having few faults and many good deeds, mercy, charity, truthfulness, and purity. Ashoka's Dhamma aimed at not only the welfare of the Mauryan empire but the welfare of the world. In his 6TH PILLAR EDICT, he clearly said, when I had been consecrated for twelve years I had an inscription of Dhamma engraved for the welfare and happiness of the world. Whoever follows it should obtain progress in Dhamma in various ways.

Ambedkar's work entitled The Buddha and His Dhamma [1957] highlights the life and personality of Buddha and presents an analytical exposition of Dhamma. In this work, Ambedkar has tried to re-interpret the Dhamma in order to show that Buddhism can amply meet the social needs of the modern world.

The present Paper will try to investigate the factors responsible for Asoka and Ambedkar's pursuing Dhamma, how it was different from Buddha's Dhamma and what were its implications.

Keywords: Buddha, Ashoka, Ambedkar, Non-violence, Toleration, Truthfulness, Equality and Social Justice, Rock Edicts, Social needs, Modern world.

1. Introduction

The teachings of Buddha had profoundly influenced the minds of Ashoka, the great Mauryan king and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, one of the makers of Modern India. Buddhism taught Prajna [understanding as against superstition and supernaturalism], Karuna [love] and Samata [equality]. It was the teachings of Buddha which influenced Ashoka and Ambedkar to follow his faith upholding the basic principles of Buddhism namely Non-violence, Toleration, Truthfulness, Equality and Social Justice. The present Paper will try to investigate the factors responsible for

Asoka and Ambedkar's pursuing Dhamma¹, how it was different from Buddha's Dhamma and what were its implications.

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It has been suggested that the Dhamma of Ashoka is in fact original Buddhism, as preached by Buddha².

According to Romila Thapar³, Dhamma was Ashoka's own invention. It may have borrowed from Buddhist and Hindu Thought, but it was in essence an attempt on the part of the king to suggest a way of life which was both practical and convenient, as well as being highly moral.

For Ashoka, Dhamma was a way of life. It was based on a high degree of social ethics and civil responsibility⁴.

Ahimsa or non-violence is an important aspect of Ashoka's Dhamma. Rock edict⁵ I announces bans on animal sacrifices. Pillar edict 5 refers to more sweeping prohibitions.

Rock edict 9 begins with a criticism of ceremonies performed by people, especially women on occasions such as illness, marriage, birth and setting forth on journeys. Ashoka contrasts these with the ceremony of Dhamma, which is bound to yield results in this world [i.e. life] and the next.

The ceremony of Dhamma is described as consisting in proper courtesy to slaves and servants, obedience to mother and father, respectful behaviour towards elders, restraint in one's dealings with all living beings, and liberality to shramanas and Brahmanas and abstaining from killing living beings.

Another aspect of Ashoka's Dhamma was the generation of mutual respect and concord among people belonging to different sects or religious communities. Rock edict 12 makes it clear

that the king expected people to exercise restraint in criticizing other sects and in praising their own. He was urging people to honour and try to understand the dhamma of others.

Ambedkar's work entitled *The Buddha and His Dhamma* [1957] highlights the life and personality of Buddha and presents an analytical exposition of Dhamma. In this work, Ambedkar has tried to re-interpret the Dhamma in order to show that Buddhism can amply meet the social needs of the modern world.

Ambedkar had studied almost all the religions of the world. He came to the conclusion that most of the religions which had influenced human civilization are dogmatic, narrow and sectarian in their outlook. They depended on miracles, wizardry and witchcraft for their existence. They are afraid of reason and hate scientific analysis and independent interpretation. The history of religion, according to Ambedkar, is replete with barbarism and inhumanity of man against man.

Ambedkar held that the major religions of the world are not free from inequality. The Sikhism proclaims spiritual equality, but outside the Gurudwaras they are just as bad as any orthodox Hindu. Christianity and Islam did not appeal to Ambedkar because they lack rationality. About Hinduism, he said: Hinduism is a senile old body which suffered in all its joints from old age and disease and holds no hope for the suffering humanity much less for the downtrodden masses of

India for whose appalling poverty and miserable condition it is directly responsible⁶.

Ambedkar was attracted towards Buddhism as it was based on moderation. Gross hedonism i.e. Eat, drink and be merry, of Charvaka and the total non-violence and asceticism of Jainism, did not find place in Buddhism. He saw in Buddhism a new hope for man, a new democratic element and new social order in accordance with the spirit of India's constitutional philosophy⁷.

Ambedkar in his book *Annihilation of Caste* begins with the words of Lord Buddha, Know Truth as Truth and Untruth as Untruth. G. S. Lokhande, Buddha's doctrines of Anicca or Anicca [Impermanence]⁸ and Annatta [Egolessness] exercised a profound influence on Dr. Ambedkar⁹.

It was the teachings of Buddha which imbibed Ambedkar to follow his faith upholding the Basic principles of Buddhism namely Equality, Justice, Non.violence and Truthfulness. Buddha gave him mental and metaphysical satisfaction and showed the way leading to the emancipation of the untouchables, by resorting to path of massconversion¹⁰.

Buddha's emphasis on the recognition of the mind as the centre of everything and that mind is the fountain of all good and evil that rises within and befalls us from without, led Ambedkar to affirm that cleaning of the mind is the essence of religion. The untouchability was not a by-product of blood or race inferiority. He ceaselessly strove to raise the mental stature of the downtrodden masses by encouraging them to have faith and hope in their creative potentialities.

Once he said: What struck me most was that my community still continues to accept a position of humiliation only because caste Hindu Persists in dominating over them. You must rely on your strength, shake off the notion that you are in any way inferior to any community.

He laid great emphasis on the individual as the centre of all doctrines and activities. He appreciated Buddha's belief in men's capacity to work out his salvation without extraneous aid.

Buddha's doctrines of egalitarianism and humanism: and his faith in the capacity of man to shape his own destiny, exercised a lasting influence on Ambedkar.

In a broadcast in May 1956, Ambedkar said: I prefer Buddhism because it gives three principles in combination which no other religion does. Buddhism teaches Prajna [understanding as against superstitions and supernaturalism], Karuna [love], and Samata [equality]. He preferred Buddha in comparision to Marx, because the former alone could provide liberty, equality and fraternity, Marx emphasized equality but failed to provide liberty andfraternity.¹¹

Ambedkar further said, Buddha's Dhamma had nothing to do with God and soul.His Dhamma had nothing to do with life after death. Nor has his Dhamma any concern with rituals and ceremonies. The centre of his Dhamma is man and the relation of man to man in his life on earth. This was his first postulate. His second postulate was that men are living in sorrow, in misery and poverty. The world is full of sufferings and that how to remove the suffering from the world is the only purpose of Dhamma. The recognition of the existence of suffering and to show the way to overcome the suffering is the foundation and the basis of his Dhamma.

The Buddha's religion is not a revelation. It was discovered by man for man. The moral order in the human society rests on man and nobody else. In it, morality has been given the place of God. Dhamma rejected the infallibility of the Vedas, Moksha [salvation of the soul], efficacy of rites, Chaturvarna, Ishwara [God], Soul, Transmigration of the Soul, Karma. Dhamma accepted the law of cause and effect. It preached social equality and stood for pulling down of all social barriers. It was for these reasons that Ambedkar was attracted towards Buddhism.

Ambedkar took an active interest in the revival of Buddhism. To him, Man is the measure of all things. The revival of Man is the key feature in Ambedkar's ideology. This idea of importance of Man, he probably derived from the Age of Renaissance and Enlightenment. The main objective of his life-mission was to emancipate his brethren from thralldom of untouchability and casteism and integrate them with the main stream.

Ambedkar recognized the revolutionary nature of Buddhist philosophy and culture, for it was Buddha who heralded the spirit of revolt against social inequality, economic suppression, political tyranny and religious discrimination. The Buddhist movement asked the people to evolve right relations between man and man in all fields of life so that the principle of bahun hitaya, bahun sukhaya could be materialized. It prepared the foundation of a humanistic culture, a prosperous and glorious civilization, from which Ambedkar picked up his political and social ideas to fight against the forces of social determinism, political tyranny and economic oppression.

Ambedkar's conception of community was moral and ethical. He argued that Hinduism or Marxism are not qualified to be communities as they are based on participation in production process. Buddhism was projected as the ideal having the value of a community grounding on morality. He considered that Buddhism attempted to found society on the basis of reason and morality.

Ambedkar said, You must abolish your slavery yourself. Do not depend for its abolition upon God or superman. Your salvation lies in political powers and not in making pilgrimage and observance of fasts. Devotion to scriptures would not free you from your bondage, wants and poverty; your forefathers have been doing it for generations, but there has been neither respite nor even a slight difference in your miserable life in any way ... your religious fasts, austerities and penances have not saved you from starvation.¹²

According to Ambedkar, ideal society could be realized by the following ways:

1. To do away with caste-ridden society—should be based on reason and morality.
2. State Socialism based on one man, one value- nationalization of agricultural land and key industries.
3. Equal share in power.
4. Restructuring of society by constitutional means.

Ambedkar's Dhamma is based on social justice. According to Ambedkar, the true bases of social justice are rooted in the teachings of Buddha. According to Buddha, Religion is necessary for a free society; religion must relate the facts of life and not to theories and speculations about

God, or Soul, or Heaven or Earth; real religion lives in the heart of man and not in the Shastras; man and morality must be centre of religion; the function of religion is to reconstruct the world; all human beings are equal; worth and not birth is the measure of man; fellowship towards all must never be abandoned, freedom from superstitions and inequalities; war is wrong unless it is for truth and justice, nothing is infallible, everything is subject to change, etc¹³.

In his recently published work,¹⁴ Ramchandra Guha writes, Dr. Ambedkar was the great leader of country's oppressed castes.

He further writes, even as Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar fought and struggled, led and governed, they wrote at great length about the world they saw and shaped.

References

1. Dharma: [Sanskrit: dharma](#); [Pali: dhamma](#) is a key concept with multiple meanings in the [Indian religions](#) Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and [Jainism](#). [Encyclopaedia Britanica]. There is [no single word translation](#) for *dharma* in western languages.[Ludo Rocher, Dharmasastra; Alban G Widgery, The Principles of Hindu Ethics]. In [Hinduism](#), *dharma* signifies behaviours that are considered to be in accord with [rta](#), the order that makes life and universe possible [The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions] and includes duties, rights, laws, conduct, virtues and “right way of living”. In [Buddhism](#) *dharma* means "cosmic law and order", but is also applied to the teachings of the Buddha. In [Buddhist philosophy](#), [dhamma/dharma](#) is also the term for "[phenomena](#)".[David Kalupahana, The Philosophy of the Middle Way]. [Dharma in](#)

[Jainism](#) refers to the teachings of [tirthankara](#) (*Jina*) and the body of doctrine pertaining to the purification and moral transformation of human beings. For [Sikhs](#), the word *dharm* means the "path of righteousness". The [Classical Sanskrit](#) noun *dharma* is a derivation from the root *dhr*, which has a meaning of "to hold, maintain, keep". [Monier Williams- A Sanskrit Dictionary].

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3. Thapar Romila, Ashoka and the Decline of the Mauryas, Oxford University Press, 1997, p.188.
4. Ibid, p.206.
5. Sircar D.C., Inscriptions of Asoka, Publications Division, 1998, Delhi.
6. Bhagwan Das [ed]: Thus Spoke Ambedkar, Vol. 2, Jalandhar, Buddhist Publishing House, 1968, p. 25.
7. D. R. Jatava: B. R. Ambedkar: Study in Society and Politics, New Delhi National Publishing House, 1998, pp 28-29.
8. Anicca or impermanence is understood by Buddhists as one of the three marks of existence, the others being dukkha (unsatisfactoriness) and anatta (non-selfhood). All things in the universe are understood by Buddhists to be characterized by these three marks of existence.

According to the impermanence doctrine, human life embodies this flux in the aging process, the cycle of birth and rebirth (*samsara*), and in any experience of loss. This is applicable to all beings and their environs including devas (mortal gods). The Buddha taught that because conditioned phenomena are impermanent, attachment to them becomes the cause for future suffering (*dukkha*). Conditioned phenomena can also be referred to as compounded, constructed, or fabricated. This is in contrast to the unconditioned, uncompounded and unfabricated nirvana, the reality that knows no change, decay or death. Impermanence is intimately associated with the doctrine of anatta, according to which things have no fixed nature, essence, or self. For example, in Mahayana Buddhism, because all phenomena are impermanent, and in a state of flux, they are understood to be empty of an intrinsic self (*shunyata*).

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