

The Perennial and the Material: Epistemic Alternatives for the Social Sciences

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Abstract. This paper explores Ambedkar's comparison between Karl Marx and Gautama Buddha in order to investigate how two thinkers, distinguished by time and space, ended up reaching similar conclusions about the nature of the world. The paper investigates the origins of rational scientific epistemology and compares it with knowledge traditions found in Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, in the process, exposing the radically different conceptions of that which is worth knowing. The paper puts forward a hypothesis that the social sciences can learn from sacred knowledge traditions to solve the fundamental problem of objectivity and thereby opens the possibility of accepting religion as a potential source of the social science's principles of enquiry.

1. Introduction

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.

- Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar

In his comparison of Buddha and Karl Marx, Ambedkar reflects on the oddity of comparing two personalities divided by such a huge span of time and who belong to totally different fields of thought. While recognising this, Ambedkar proceeds into the comparison in a manner that gives the impression of it being perhaps the most obvious thing to do. The basis of the comparison, for Ambedkar, lies in the listing out of the basic tenets of the thought of Marx and Buddha, which on comparison, throws up some common points.

Marx, writing in the nineteenth century, had famously declared that philosophers had till then only tried to understand the world while the point in actuality was to change it. For change to come about, it was of course essential to expose the undesirability of the present state of affairs. Marx justified his call for change through the materialist conception of history which

expounds the rising contradictions in the capitalist mode of production leading to the conditions apt for the proletariat to rise in revolution. Over time, many premises of Marxist theory came to be challenged and questioned based on both experience and logic. For instance, the economic interpretation of history was not accepted as the only explanation of history. However, Ambedkar observed that despite being under conditions of rigorous critical scrutiny, what was left of Marx was a 'residue of fire', small yet important. This residue consisted of four items which Ambedkar lists out as follows:

- The function of philosophy is to reconstruct the world and not to waste its time in explaining the origins of the world.
- That there is a conflict of interest between class and class.
- That private ownership of property brings power to one class and sorrow to another through exploitation.
- That it is necessary for the good of society that sorrow be removed by the abolition of private property (Ambedkar, 1987: 6).

It is based on these four main surviving tenets of Marxism that Ambedkar enters into a comparison with Gautama Buddha. On the first point, he finds Buddha and Marx in complete agreement since Buddha time and again refused to comment on questions pertaining to idea of God and soul and also on questions aimed at knowing whether the world is eternal or whether there is life after death. He sees Buddha's silence on these matters as a sign of him being interested only in reconstruction of the world rather than at explanation of the origins of the world. However, it must be noted, that Buddha's silence on these matters is not necessarily an indicator of him considering such questions as irrelevant or any less important. The Buddha may well have refrained from speaking on all such questions for which he had no certain answer, including the ones pertaining to aspects of actual reality. And yet, it does not significantly puncture Ambedkar's interpretation and hence can be safely accepted. On the second point of class conflict, Ambedkar asserts that Buddha recognised class conflict as the cause of misery in the world. He gives no convincing illustration or real evidence to make his argument more concrete. It is common knowledge that the Buddha recognised the existence of conflict in the world but whether he ever saw conflict as filtered through the idea of economic class, is

something that is unknown and very doubtful. The conflict could well be between father and son, husband and wife, employer and employed, between two castes, between two women, between children or between kings. And yet, without jumping on to critique Ambedkar, one can perhaps choose to trust his analysis. On the third point pertaining to private ownership and exploitation, Ambedkar throws light on how Buddha accepted that sorrow and misery exist. 'If for misery one reads exploitation the Buddha is not far away from Marx', Ambedkar contends. Now two points must be noted here. Firstly, Marx himself never used the word sorrow. In his analysis, the proletariat are subjected to exploitation. Marx being a rationalist, chose for his analysis something that could be concretely shown to exist, scientifically, as a fact, something that is objective and economically calculable. Sorrow on the other hand is a human feeling, unquantifiable and unrepresentable through mathematical graphs and formulas which explains why Marx never uses sorrow as his point of analysis. A comparison of exploitation and sorrow may not be suitable for sorrow is not exclusively caused by exploitation. Sorrow has many roots and even the unexploited bourgeoisie may have sorrow in their hearts. Nevertheless, in Ambedkar's defence, some sorrow may definitely be caused by exploitation and it is here that sorrow and exploitation and thereby Buddha and Marx definitely meet in their concerns. On the fourth point related to abolition of private property, Ambedkar reflects on a conversation between Ananda and the Buddha –

'I have said that avarice is because of possession. Now in what way that is so, Ananda, is to be understood after this manner. Where there is no possession of any sort or kind whatever by anyone or anything, then there being no possession whatever, would there owing to this cessation of possession, be any appearance of avarice?'

'There would not, Lord.'

'Wherefore, Ananda, just that is the ground, the basis, the genesis, the cause of avarice, to wit, possession. I have said that tenacity is the cause of possession. Now in what way that is so Ananda, is to be understood after this manner. Where there no tenacity of any sort or kind whatever shown by anyone with respect to one thing, then there being whatever, would there owing to this cessation of tenacity, be any appearance of possession?'

'There would not, Lord'

'Wherefore, Ananda, just that is the ground, the basis, the genesis, the cause of possession, to wit, tenacity' (ibid. 8)

Ambedkar uses this conversation to show how both Buddha and Marx wanted abolition of private property. While this interpretation is an intelligent one, it does not definitely provide the whole picture and is in some ways even misleading. For, as was the case with sorrow and exploitation earlier, here too the difference between Buddha and Marx lies in the fact that Marx used the concept of private property due to its economic calculability while Buddha saw doing away with possession as a moral and value issue and did not see possession exclusively in economic terms. Possession and property do not necessarily always coincide. Humans possess much more than just material property. When Buddha talks of not having possession, he talks not only about material possessions but also of not possessing ego, not possessing arrogance, not possessing hatred, not possessing lust, not possessing material desire beyond minimal need. As may be obvious, private property at best formed a very minute fraction of what Buddha expected man to be unpossessed of. In the purely economic sense, Buddha was against men possessing more than what they need while consciously keeping their needs absolutely minimal. His approach to equality, in a way, is almost the exact opposite of Marx. Marx, for one, was not against industrialisation and profitable use of machinery. His point of contention was the injustice done to the worker who is paid less than the price of the commodity he produces. The bourgeoisie, by virtue of paying less, ends up appropriating surplus value, part of which is reinvested to keep the circulation of money through the economy intact. The solution Marx gave was that property should be in the hands of the state only which can then be trusted to plan and distribute common wealth equally for all. Marx thus imagined a society in which everybody's needs are equally satisfied. Buddha on the other hand imagined a society without needs, beyond the merely minimal. If there will be no need, there will be no desire for need satisfaction, no avarice, no tenacity.

The Buddhist conception on non-possession would perhaps find greater parallels with the life of Bushmen of the Kalahari who follow what is referred to as the 'Zen road to affluence' whereby affluence is achieved not by producing more but by desiring less, in short, a kind of affluence without abundance (Sahlins, 1972). There is institutionalisation of modest material possessions and the affluence bar is culturally kept extremely low which establishes the Bushman as an 'Uneconomic man', defying the bourgeoisie construction of rational economic man who is constantly striving for maximum satisfaction of his unlimited wants (ibid. 13). Karl Marx was disturbed by the fact that the proletariat is paid only that much bare minimum which it

requires to maintain itself and buy that fixed bunch of commodities necessary for its survival thereby reducing the worker to the level of a beast in the advanced capitalist civilisation. For Buddha, although the conception of the economic was not central, it can be said that the idea of the workers having the bare minimum would not have perhaps troubled much. The Beast for Marx, is for the Buddha the Bhikku. Rules of the Bhikku sangh allowed Bhikkus to possess only 8 things – three robes to wear, a girdle for the loins, an alms bowl, a razor, a needle, and a water strainer (Ambedkar, 1987: 8). Even the most exploited and alienated worker of the capitalist age would safely possess much more than this bare minimum. And hence, what for Marx is a condition so poor and exploitative is for Buddha a condition of over-possession that must be further given up. Buddha would logically not call for a revolution of one economic class against the other but would perhaps peacefully appeal to everyone to join the Sangha and observe its rules. Nevertheless, Ambedkar does have a point that Marx and Buddha do converge, although very slightly, with extreme difficulty, on some crucial issues.

If Ambedkar's argument of Buddha and Marx reaching common conclusions about society is taken as correct, then it logically throws up the question - How is it that two individuals so hugely separated by time and space end up reaching the same conclusions about social reality? What is perhaps even more interesting is the methods they may have applied to study society and its problems. By virtue of the conclusive similarities between the two, it becomes important to compare their ideas of what knowledge is, truth is, and how it can be attained/reached at. In short, what were their Epistemological and Methodological positions? It is along this path that I now intend to proceed.

2. Secularisation through Religion

When the intellectual and epistemological legacy of the West is sketched out, the period of sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is seen as a watershed. Several landmark studies have tried to map this watershed. Max Weber, for instance, drew a convincing link between puritan values and a new rational economic ethics such that the cultivation of a specific work ethic, motivated by the ideas of salvation and this-worldly asceticism, led to systematic accumulation and reinvestment of capital, in the process, promoting rational conduct. Similarly, Robert Merton showcased how Protestantism promoted systematic and empirical study of nature by paying emphasis on glorification of the world of God and the removal of corrupt elements. A form of

disguised utilitarianism coupled with empiricism was promoted which was in sync with values of modern science (Tambiah, 1990: 12-13). Stanley Tambiah also showcased a link between protestant theology and the theories of modern science:

‘Calvin’s insistence on absolutist rule by a cosmic ruler, a radical monotheistic stress, did of course allow for the occurrence of miracles that God might perform if he so wished, but the more important implication of this absolutist cosmology was that it subsequently accommodated the notion of a God who acted according to regular laws of nature, which were designed by him. Thus this new conception of regular laws of nature which could be understood by man in terms of his empirical experience, was integrally and vitally in accord with the scientific spirit of the time. A further entailment of the conception of sovereign God who has promulgated the laws of nature, which man could investigate and affirm empirically through his own senses and ingenuity, was to allow that sovereign God to recede further and further from view in everyday practice of positive science (this is the slope that finally led to “Secularisation of the World”)’ (ibid 16-17).

Seen from this backdrop that Stanley Tambiah highlights, Karl Marx appears to be a direct product of this historical intellectual tendency in the west. The process of God receding further and further from view in the practice of Positive Science gives way eventually, with the triumph of Science, to a kind of atheistic hostility towards the idea of God. Karl Marx showcases this tendency when he proclaims that men make history in accordance with their material conditions of existence, completely negating any influence of God over men and showing a clear rationalist, empiricist and positivist orientation. Negation of God automatically led to a negative evaluation of Religion and also of anyone speaking for religion.

With God hidden in the background, the dominance of religion was something that Marx would not accept. His was a conscious effort, thereby, to separate himself from everything that was not empirical, not rational, and not scientific. Coupled with this tendency was the process of the definition of the ‘real’ as un-sacred, un-godly, controllable and knowable. And it is this concrete, observable, calculable, measurable ‘real’ which now constituted knowledge and truth:

The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity. These premises can thus be verified in a purely empirical way (Marx, 1968: 3)

Thus, religion, morality and metaphysics become mere *responses* to material behaviour. The real life of Individuals becomes the starting point of all knowledge in the materialist framework. With this, Marx dictated the end of all theology and religion. By virtue of being within the secularised framework, Marx ended up using categories like Exploitation, property etc. instead of, as pointed out earlier, sorrow or possession, which, as categories, exceed in meaning beyond their limited material manifestations.

3. De-Sacralisation

The process of secularisation and rationalisation is seen by many as a process of de-sacralisation. Objectively speaking these two words are pointing towards the same process and yet, the two terms, while being objectively congruent, are qualitatively incompatible and showcase the same process in opposing lights. Secularisation tells the story of progress, evolution, rise of reason and the triumph of science. De-Sacralisation, on the other hand, tells the story of loss, of the rise of incapacity, of separation, lack of meaning and unattainability of bliss:

Reality was at once being, knowledge, and bliss (the sat, chit, and ananda of the Hindu tradition or qudrah, hikmah, and rahmah which are among the Names of Allah in Islam) and in that “now” which is the ever-present “in the beginning,” knowledge continues to possess a profound relation with that principial and primordial Reality which is the Sacred and the source of all that is sacred. Through the downward flow of the river of time and the multiple refractions and reflections of Reality upon the myriad mirrors of both macrocosmic and microcosmic manifestation, knowledge has become separated from being and the bliss or ecstasy which characterizes the union of knowledge and being. Knowledge has become nearly completely externalized and desacralized, especially among those segments of the human race which have become transformed by the process of modernization, and that bliss which is the fruit of union with the One and an aspect of the perfume of the sacred has become well-nigh unattainable and beyond the grasp of the vast majority of those who walk upon the earth (Nasr, 1989: 6)

In this conception, all knowledge is intrinsically knowledge of the sacred supreme substance and the instrument for gaining knowledge of this ‘Absolute’ is the intellect. In such a conception, the object of knowledge is forever non-dual in character. Binaries of material and ideal, good and bad and past and present all vanish in the pursuit of that which was, is and will be at the heart of human intelligence. As opposed to the materialist conception of material existence determining consciousness, knowledge here is based on the conception of the ‘Being’, a divine consciousness of which human consciousness is but a mere reflection, an echo of the transcendental ‘Highest

common factor' (Huxley, 1947). This reality being in its nature infinite, is knowable only through an intellect which is total and objective and inseparable from the sacred (ibid. 8) The rise of 'profane' science is seen to have a direct link to the loss of this sapiential dimension common to various traditions. The watershed here too comes with the Enlightenment. Descartes, in concluding 'I think, therefore I am', Descartes established the individual self as the foundation of all epistemology, thereby rendering the 'Being' irrelevant (ibid. 34). By making the thinking individual ego as the centre of all reality, Descartes sowed the seeds of pure rationalism and knowledge became rooted now in the *cogito*. Caught in the chain of logic and reason, the knowledge seeker was torn apart from intellect and revelation which were no longer accepted as genuine sources of knowledge. After Descartes, through the writings of Hegel and Marx, an immutable vision of the world was transformed into a vision constantly marked by change (ibid. 35). The Perennial element of knowledge was lost in favour of knowledge of constantly changing material conditions:

'Reason cut off from its root in the permanent could not but reduce reality to process, time to pure quantity, and history to a process without a transcendent entelechy and, at the same time, the mother and progenitor of all that the modern mentality considered as reality. Time rather than eternity became the source of all things. Ideas, rather than Being, considered as true or false in themselves, were relegated completely to the domain of historical change and considered significant only as historical events. A historicism was born which resulted in the same kind of desacralization of history and the temporal process itself that one finds in philosophy and science (ibid. 37).

This loss of the sacred eventually fuelled a quest for its rediscovery and those who set out on this quest ended up eventually following the path that led them in the direction towards the Orient. Orientalism, thus, has a close connection with the search for a form of knowledge hitherto lost in the west (ibid. 88). Among the philosophers and poets who rediscovered the orient was Goethe who wrote:

North and South and West are crumbling,
Thrones are falling, kingdoms trembling:
Come, flee away to purer East,
There on patriarch's air to feast,
There with love and drink and song
Khiser's spring shall make thee young.

There, pure and right where still they find,
Will I drive all mortal kind
To the great depths whence all things rise,
There still to gain, in godly wise,
Heaven's lore in earthly speech,
Heads might break ere they could reach(ibid. 89)

With this recognition of the effort at rediscovery of tradition in the west, we can now return back to India where colonisation led to the introduction of western rational scientific education thereby shaping minds like never before. Colonialism had a peculiar effect on the colonised such that it rendered unconscious certain structures which the native accepted and uses against the coloniser:

'More dangerous and permanent are the inner rewards and punishments, the secondary psychological gains and losses from suffering and submission under colonialism. They are almost always unconscious and almost always ignored. Particularly strong is the inner resistance to recognising the ultimate violence which colonialism does to its victims, namely that it creates a culture in which the ruled are constantly tempted to fight their rulers within the psychological limits set by the latter'(Nandy, 1983: 3)

This emphasis on 'psychological limits' is very much in sync with the argument that 'an aspect of the perfume of the sacred has become well-nigh unattainable' to the modern mind. It would not be wrong to say that the 'modern' mind in India cannot be seen in isolation from the colonial efforts of shaping the Indian mind through introduction of western rational scientific education. The psychological limit introduced in the Indian mind by colonisers was precisely the limitation of de-sacralisation, of not being able to use intellect and being totally limited down by strict chains of reason. It is in this light that we must look at Ambedkar's analysis of Gautama Buddha.

4. **Knowledge as Essence**

I would be apt at this moment to throw light on the story of Svetaketu from the Chandogya Upanishad, showcasing what constitutes real knowledge in sacred epistemology found in Indian traditions. The story goes like this –

When Svetaketu was twelve years old he was sent to a teacher, with whom he studied until he was twenty-four. After learning all the Vedas, he returned home full of conceit in the belief that he was consummately well educated, and very censorious. His father said

to him, 'Svetaketu, my child, you who are so full of your learning and so censorious, have you asked for that knowledge by which we hear the unheard, by which we perceive what cannot be perceived and know what cannot be known? '

'What is that knowledge, sir?' asked Svetaketu.

His father replied, 'As by knowing one lump of clay all that is made of clay is known, the difference being only in name, but the truth being that all is clay so, my child, is that knowledge, knowing which we know all.'

'But surely these venerable teachers of mine are ignorant of this knowledge; for if they possessed it they would have imparted it to me. Do you, sir, therefore give me that knowledge?'

'So be it,' said the father. . . . And he said, ' Bring me a fruit of the nyagrodha tree.'

'Here is one, sir.'

'Break it.'

'It is broken, sir.'

'What do you see there?'

'Some seeds, sir, exceedingly small.'

'Break one of these.'

'It is broken, sir.'

'What do you see there?'

'Nothing at all.'

The father said, 'My son, that subtle essence which you do not perceive there in that very essence stands the being of the huge nyagrodha tree. In that which is the subtle essence all that exists has its self. That is the True, that is the Self, and thou, Svetaketu, art That.'

'Pray, sir' said the son, 'tell me more'.

'Be it so, my child,' the father replied; and he said, 'Place this salt in water, and come to me tomorrow morning.'

The son did as he was told.

Next morning the father said, ' Bring me the salt which you put in the water.'

The son looked for it, but could not find it; for the salt, of course, had dissolved.

The father said, 'Taste some of the water from the surface of the vessel. How is it?'

'Salty.'

'Taste some from the middle. How is it ? '

'Salty.'

'Taste some from the bottom. How is it?'

'Salty.'

The father said, 'Throw the water away and then come back to me again'. The son did so; but the salt was not lost, for salt exists for ever.

Then the father said, 'Here likewise in this body of yours, my son, you do not perceive the True; but there in fact it is. In that which is the subtle essence, all that exists has its self. That is the True, that is the Self, and thou, Svetaketu, art That' (Huxley, 1947: 9-10)

This story from the Chandogya Upanishad sheds light on the radically different conception of knowledge at play here. As opposed to the materialist and rationalist understanding of knowledge as concrete, measurable and calculable, this episteme lays emphasis, not on knowing the knowable, but on knowing that which is arguably unknowable. It intends to know that transcendental absolute reality which is both inside us and outside us, of which we are made and so is everything else in the universe. The non-dual universalistic nature of this epistemology is also reflected in Buddha talking about possession and sorrow, categories that are universalistic and cannot be made to fit into any one category of a binary. For example, it is not possible to say that a Shudra has sorrow and Brahmin doesn't or the capitalist has possession and the Worker doesn't. Sorrow and possession are universal truths, equally present to everyone irrespective of caste, class, race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality.

This immaterial essence which is given the status of true knowledge in this episteme is often symbolised in the form of God. An example of this is found in the Bhagwat Gita, where knowledge becomes equivalent of having union with the Absolute One. On Arjun's query about what is that which is worth knowing, what is the field that the knower must know about, Krishna expounds –

He exists without and within all beings, He is unmoving and also moving, He is beyond grasp being too subtle. He is utterly distant and yet so near. Though indivisible, He is parcelled out among beings. Know him to be the sustainer, destroyer and creator of all Beings. He is light of all lights and said to be beyond darkness (ignorance). He is knowledge itself, object of knowledge and attainable through knowledge. He dwells in all Hearts. Thus I have told you in brief about the field (kshetra) and knowledge and the object of knowledge. Knowing this, My Devotee becomes fit to attain union with Me (Ghosh, 1972: 292-293)

With the object of knowledge identified, it becomes crucial to discuss the Method prescribed to know the sacred transcendental self that resides in everyone and everything. Bhagwat Gita identifies four paths to the realisation of the ultimate reality – Dhyana Yoga, Samkhya Yoga, Karma Yoga and Bhakti yoga (ibid. 297). Without getting into the specifics of the particular kinds, it is best to simply explore the bases on which these methods have been set up. What is important to notice in these methods is that by virtue of being ways of knowing the absolute and the immaterial, they often require the individual to gain mental independence from his surroundings. The Marxist assertion that the material conditions of individuals shapes their consciousness is here converted into a situation that is to be consciously overcome through rigorous effort. Sri Aurobindo, for instance, in his discussion on yoga, identifies Peace (Shanti), Calm (Sthirata), Quiet (Achanchalata) and Silence (Nishchala Niravata) as the desirable four states of mind with silence being the most complex and positive state (1936: 17-18). These states of mind can be achieved only when the mind is emptied of everything that comes into it from outside:

‘Keep the quietude and do not mind if it is for a time an empty quietude; the consciousness is often like a vessel which has to be emptied of its mixed or undesirable contents; it has to be kept vacant for a while till it can be filled with things new and true, right and pure. The one thing to be avoided is the refilling of the cup with the old turbid contents. Meanwhile wait, open yourself upwards, call very quietly and steadily, not with a too restless eagerness, for the peace to come into the silence and, once the peace is there, for the joy and the presence’ (ibid. 18-19)

This method of achievement of peace and joy through Yoga is in sync with the earlier assertion that reality is at the same time Being, knowledge and Bliss. He who has peace/bliss/joy has knowledge and is aware of the Being. The Upanishads and the Gita, however, are said to operate under the Hindu fold, which Buddhism is seen as a challenge against. The beginning of Buddhism is with the assertion that all things are void, which basically means empty. The emptiness of all things is seen as contradictory to the Hindu idea of Atman which can neither be touched nor heard or seen but is there in us. When the Buddha asserts that human beings are by nature ‘Non-Atman’, he is speaking about the personal self specifically and not the universal transcendental self. What the Buddha means by this is that the individual psyche is neither substantial in nature nor is it in any way eternal. The following anecdote from a Pali text would support this argument–

A Brahmin Drona, seeing the blessed one sitting under a tree asked him ‘Are you a Deva?’ In response he was told ‘I am not’. ‘Are you a Gandharva?’ he was asked and in reply he was told ‘I am not’. ‘Are you a man?’ was the next question and in response came ‘I am not’. When the Brahmin finally asked who he might actually be the Blessed one replied –

‘Those evil influences, those cravings, whose non-destruction would have individualized me as a deva, a gandharva, a yaksha (three types of supernatural being), or a man, I have completely annihilated. Know therefore that I am Buddha’ (Huxley, 1947: 55-56)

Buddha thus comes across as anatheistic and practical preacher whose sole motive is to remove the fire of greed, the tendency to get carried away with passion, and sorrow from the human heart. Ambedkar constantly pointed out how the Buddha refused to comment on issues like immortality of the soul and eternity of the world and saw it as a denial of god and religion. His refusal to speak on such topics is also seen by Ambedkar as a commitment to social reform and change. However, why Buddha refused to speak on matters of soul and origins of the world was because his concern was not with change but with Nirvana, which is an experience available only to the totally selfless. Instead of talking of annihilation of caste and Capitalism, what the Buddha would instead annihilate is greed, desire and sense of the self. In taking greed as the subject of annihilation, Buddha again displays the universalistic and non-materialist nature of knowledge in the traditional epistemology. As the reader might notice, Ambedkar’s analysis of Buddha is completely devoid of the sacred content of Buddha’s thought. In this sense, Ambedkar embodies the modern man’s incapacity to get a sense of the sacred which is present in the thoughts and views of the Buddha but absent in Ambedkar’s understanding of Buddhism. In short, Ambedkar alienates the reader from the sacred content of Buddhism.

Having reached the above conclusion, it nevertheless remains a matter of fascination how two men (Buddha and Marx) from so drastically different epistemic traditions ended up reaching conclusions so close that they can actually be seen as complimentary. The comparison between Buddha and Marx redeems the traditional method of gaining knowledge and puts it in a position of equality vis-à-vis the rational materialist epistemology of Marx. The revolutionary potential, made explicit in Marx, is nevertheless found to be underlying the ideas of Nirvana or Atman or God which free man not only from the economic exploitation and material constraints but also from being slave to the rules of reason and from his own ego. Rationality requires reason, reason requires an individual mind and the conscious individual mind requires the existence of the an

individual ego/self, and since the bases of knowledge for Buddha was not the individual ego, individual mind and its sense of reason but instead the eventual lack of this all, it can be said with some certainty that the Buddha was everything but not rational, but not logical. Anything therefore which is rational and logical, other things being equal, is not the word of the Buddha but the product of a de-sacralised mind working under modern psychological limitations.

5. The Objectivity Problem

Sociology as a discipline, ever since its inception, has grappled with the question of objectivity. A proper sociological analysis is always considered as one which is value neutral, produced without any biases or prejudices or pre-conceived notions about the object of research. It requires, in short, to convert the mind into an empty slate. Emile Durkheim in his discussion on sociological methods laid stress on the sociologist treating social facts as 'data' and in studying these, he stressed, 'one must systematically discard all presuppositions' (1982:72). How one must do this systematically is not something with which Durkheim deals in detail. He refers to Descartes and his practiced method of doubt as an example of practice of this rule. Often, in the quest to attain value neutrality, social scientists tempt themselves to adopt the methods of the natural sciences, most popularly physics. However, sociologists have forever found it almost impossible to attain complete objectivity and go about doing their works in a totally value free manner:

There is, for instance, the misguided and erroneous methodological approach of naturalism or scientism which urges that it is high time that the social sciences learn from the natural sciences what scientific method is. This misguided naturalism establishes such demands as: begin with observations and measurements; this means, for instance, begin by collecting statistical data; proceed, next, by induction to generalizations and to the formation of theories. It is suggested that in this way you will approach the ideal of scientific objectivity, so far as this is at all possible in the social sciences. In so doing, however, you ought to be conscious of the fact that objectivity in the social sciences is much more difficult to achieve (if it can be achieved at all) than in the natural sciences. For an objective science must be 'value-free'; that is, independent of any value judgment. But only in the rarest cases can the social scientist free himself from the value system of his own social class and so achieve even a limited degree of 'value freedom' and 'objectivity' (Popper, 1977: 90)

The problem of value neutrality and presuppositions presents itself even more significantly when the sociologist/ social anthropologist studies his own self, his own people, his own society, in

which he as an individual has invested varied emotions over the years. It is very difficult to rid oneself off all these emotions and views for the service of the ideal of value neutrality. It is for this reason that Sociologists have forever kept close to their hearts the idea of externality, of treating the object of research as something 'external' and himself as an 'outsider'. One might notice that this distinction of the self and other as different is representative of the rational scientific epistemology as opposed to the traditional episteme in which the self and the other is nothing but One and the same. Nevertheless, even the externality of the sociologist does not ease one's quest for complete value neutrality:

The anthropologist is not the observer from Mars which he so often believes himself to be and whose social role he often attempts to play (and not without gusto); quite apart from the fact that there is no reason to suppose that an inhabitant of Mars would see us more 'objectively' than we, for instance, see ourselves (ibid. 92)

As men of society we all hold dear to us some ideals whose attainment we see as desirable. These ideals are all subjectively based. There is an irresistible tendency to choose those facts and present those data which can be used to logically produce theories which suit our conceptions of what society should be like or how they presently are. Only that knowledge which suits us is mostly considered as more relevant by us:

'The type of social science in which we are interested is an empirical science of concrete reality (Wirklichkeitswissenschaft) Now as soon as we attempt to reflect about the way in which life confronts us in immediate concrete situations, it presents an infinite multiplicity of successively and coexistently emerging and disappearing events, both within and outside ourselves. The absolute infinitude of this multiplicity is seen to remain undiminished even when our attention is focused on a single "object" All the analysis of infinite reality which the finite human mind can conduct rests on the tacit assumption that only a finite portion of this reality constitutes the object of scientific investigation, and that only it is "important" in the sense of being "worthy of being known"(Weber, 1949: 72)

In the rational scientific epistemology, with objectivity being an impossibility, what we end up studying is not reality per se but its limited segments which we attach relevance to. And no matter how many studies happen, the infinite nature of reality always leaves aspects of reality unexplored and un-researched. In short, scientific understanding of society can never be all exhaustive of social reality. Scientific knowledge is non-universalistic (thereby aimed at specialised study of various limited segments) and dual in character in the sense of making a

distinction between the inside and the outside, between the self and the other. Reality, in contrast is infinite and non-dual in the sense of being both inside and outside us. If this conclusion is correct, then clearly the universalistic and non-dual methods present in the traditional epistemology are equally relevant, if not more for gaining a wholesome understanding of social reality in both its material and non-material aspects. Max Weber tried to redeem scientific knowledge by freeing it from the burden of being objective in the sense of being value neutral. He suggested that, instead of trying to attain 'an attitude of moral indifference' the social scientist must constantly inquire into the standards of judgement that he employs and should consciously make them explicit to the reader. So the only way to be objective is by making one's biases explicit. By saying so, Weber put too much faith on the sense of ethics of the social science researcher which can never be beyond the scope of sufficient doubt.

Perhaps because Weber was writing at a time when the historical trajectory was highly in favour of science and rationality, he could not explicitly assert the need to look back at the sacred methodologies left behind, for finding answers to the question of objectivity. It is also understandable that being the product of the post enlightenment age, he too was incapable of grasping the sacred roots of reality which the traditional methods sought to explore. However, the post-colonial modern individual of today, who notices that the triumphant modern science, although still going securely strong, has consciously shed some of its arrogance, must realise that the key to attaining the elusive ideal of objectivity lies not in social sciences aping the ways of the natural sciences but in looking into sacred traditions and trying to understand how our ancestors trained their mind to remain consciously unresponsive to external material and emotional stimulus, thereby gaining the ability to look at society while finding themselves detached from everyone and everything except the Absolute One (which incidentally the rationalist would assert is actually No one). The unshakable attachment to the Absolute One or the absolute transcendental self is not incongruent with the needs for being selfless, valueless and unbiased with respect to other individuals and material objects found in the ordinary lower social reality which can then be talked about and written about in a purely value neutral and objective way. It is in exploration of this possibility that feel social research must turn to, with the potential of either finding the solution to the objectivity problem or simply resigning the claims to objectivity which social science is so often found guilty of making.

6. Conclusion

The radically different conceptions of knowledge found in the sacred knowledge traditions allows the possibility to strengthen the scientific epistemology at a place where it presents itself as the weakest: the objectivity problem. The realisation of this fact further opens up the potential of giving religion an equal status to modern science with respect providing the social sciences with their principles of enquiry. This argument for equal status is further strengthened by Ambedkar's comparison between Buddha and Marx which, while being problematic, nevertheless redeems sacred epistemology by highlighting its efficacy in making sense of the world and coming up with conclusions that are at par with the conclusions derived from the scientific epistemology.

7. References

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