

Role of Buddhism in Ambedkar's Life and His Strife for Human Dignity and Freedom

Dr. Archana Baudh¹, Narsingh Nath Bauddha²

¹Assistant Professor, History, Chandulal Chandrakar Art and Commerce College, Dhamdha, Durg

ABSTRACT

Gautam Buddha's humanitarian philosophy spread throughout the world in a short span of time. The dynasties and rulers of India made no shortage in propagating Buddha's teachings. The Brihadrath dynasty, Haryak dynasty, Nag dynasty, Maurya dynasty, Kushan dynasty, Satavahana dynasty, Vakataka dynasty, Maukhari-Pal dynasty, and Vardhan dynasty all provided protection to Buddhism. In the land of Maharashtra, advocates like Rakshit and Dharmarakshit propagated the Buddhist religion. The interest of Satavahana and Vakataka rulers in the Buddhist religion is evident in caves like Ajanta, Ellora, and Kanheri which are still alive today. The rulers of the Nag dynasty accepted Buddha's teachings from the beginning. The influence of the Kabir Panth was on Baba Saheb Ambedkar from childhood, who spread the teachings of the Buddhist religion in the medieval period through his writings. Dr. Ambedkar was presented with the book "Buddha Charitra" by Shri Krishna Keluskar at the age of 16, which greatly influenced him. His character and personality played a significant role in his upbringing. The equality, freedom, and brotherhood of Buddhist philosophy empowered Dr. Ambedkar to fight against the prevalent evils in Indian society. The caste system and the hierarchy of high and low had made Dr. Ambedkar an untouchable, which forced him to face social discrimination at every step. After studying various religions, Dr. Ambedkar spoke of abandoning Hinduism in 1931 and embraced Buddhism in 1956.

Keywords: Dr.Baba Saheb Ambedkar, humanitarian, Buddhist philosophy, social evils

Introduction

"I consider the teachings of Buddha to be the best among all religions. No other religion can compare to it. If a modern person who understands science wants to adopt any religion, it can only be the Buddha's teachings. I have had unwavering faith in this for 35 years, after studying the subtle aspects of all religions." - Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar

The statement by Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar above introduces the greatness of Buddha's teachings and its scientific essence. Because of its logical reasoning and scientific approach, Buddha's teachings spread across various parts of the world. His humanistic ideology advocates for human dignity, equality, freedom, and universal brotherhood, aspiring for the welfare of humanity.

The birth of Gautama Buddha is believed to be in 563 BCE. Before him, 28 Buddhas are mentioned, indicating a tradition of Buddhism in India. Man was given the title of 'Buddha' in dedication to the welfare of mankind. Evidence of the Buddha tradition is found in the Indus Valley Civilization, with structures like stupas, figurines, man wearing chivara (robe), and worship of the pipal tree. The ancient Buddhists advocated for a life based on humanitarian values, rejecting the existence of God and focusing on living a worldly life. This humanistic ideology of Buddha is close to naturalism. Just as nature doesn't discriminate

among beings, providing equal opportunities to all, the feeling of compassion, love, kindness, and friendliness is equal for everyone. Due to the artificiality and pretense in human behaviour, many distortions emerged in society. Buddhists scientifically refuted these distortions and taught society that water is related to thirst, and food is related to hunger, so why discrimination? And for what? This is why contemporary society accepted Buddha as a social reformer. His path was followed by every class, caste, and even prostitutes, abandoning the wrong path and embracing the path of truth. This was a great social transformation of the time. For the welfare of humanity, he established the Bhikkhu Sangha and said to them, "O Bhikkhus! Just as I have wandered for the benefit and happiness of the multitude, for the welfare and happiness of all beings, you should also wander, out of compassion, for the benefit and happiness of the multitude." He taught the practice of minimal sin, compassion, charity, purity, sweet speech, and virtuous behaviour for the welfare of all beings. Emperor Ashoka defined this very teaching as 'Dhamma' in the Edicts, stating, "**Apasinnava, Bahukayane, Daya-Dane, Sache-Sachave, Madhave-Sadhve Cha**" His teachings inspired marginalized, oppressed, and deprived societies to live a dignified life and showed the path to liberation from mental slavery. Since Dr. Ambedkar was born in an oppressed and marginalized society, he found the path to a dignified life in Buddha's teachings and was inspired for the welfare of humanity.

Development of Buddhism - Gautama Buddha's renunciation of worldly pleasures and political power not only attracted common people but also influenced contemporary royal dynasties. King Bimbisara of Magadha accepted his discipleship after long discussions. Similarly, rulers of various states like Kosala, Vatsa, Avanti, and Dakshina Kosala accepted his teachings. His teachings spread far and wide in contemporary India. The main reason for the widespread was delivering messages in the language of the masses and the establishment of the Bhikkhu Sangha, along with his attractive and influential personality. Ajatashatru organized the first Buddhist council on the occasion of Buddha's death. Later rulers like the Nagas, Mauryas, Kushans, Vardhanas, Palas, and southern Indian dynasties played a significant role in the development of Buddhism. That's why India was called the 'World Teacher.' Buddhist universities like Nalanda, Vikramashila, Takshashila, and Odantapuri administered in India, leaving no stone unturned in the propagation of Indian Buddhist culture. They attracted scholars from various countries, including Chinese travelers Hiuen Tsang, Fahyan, and Itsing.

Spread of Buddhism in Maharashtra - Emperor Ashoka appointed 'Mahadhammarakkhita' and 'Dhammarakkhita' as Dhamma preachers for the Deccan and Karnataka regions, respectively. Subsequently, Satavahana and Vakataka rulers developed Buddhism. Evidence of this is seen in the construction of the five-story Buddha vihara in Sirpur by a Satavahana ruler mentioned in the travel accounts of Hiuen Tsang. The Vakatakas constructed caves in Ajanta, Kanheri, Bhaja, and Karle, reviving Buddhism. Therefore, we can see that the influence of Buddha's teachings has been profound in the Maharashtra region for a long time. Dr. Ambedkar's ancestors belonged to this land, so somewhere they were rooted in Buddhist teachings.

Dr. Ambedkar's Childhood and Family Background in Buddhism - Dr. Ambedkar's family were followers of Kabirpanth, where hymns of Kabir were sung in his paternal home by Dada Maloji Sakpal and father Ramji Sakpal. Kabir Das propagated Buddha's thoughts in his hymns. Kabir strongly criticized the caste system and societal disparities prevalent in the 13th and 14th centuries. The impact of Kabir's teachings continued in India, and its development is still ongoing. Baba Saheb Ambedkar's favorite hymn was Kabir's, and he used to sing this song in gatherings."

“Kabira Kahe ye jag andha, andhi jaisi gaay bachada tha so mar gaya, jhuthi cham chataye”

Kabir says this world is blind, like a blind cow with a calf, so it died. False pretense, Kabir says this world is blind.

On the occasion of his seventh birthday, Dr. Ambedkar says that his first guru was Buddha, his second guru was Kabir, and his third guru was Mahatma Jyotiba Phule. From the age of 12-13, my home was the centre of religion, and they were also teachers of education. Kabir Das was influenced by the teachings of Buddha, and my father was a follower of Kabir, so the influence of Buddha's teachings indirectly affected me since childhood. He said - when I passed an exam, our chawl residents organized a celebration. In that celebration, Dada Kaeluskar gifted me the book "Buddha Charitra". When I read this book, after that, there was a different awakening within me. After studying the teachings of Buddhism in this book, my eagerness to study increased, and Buddha's teachings greatly influenced my mind.

Influence of wisdom and character - All humans worship some deity, just like I also worship three deities. My first deity is knowledge, without which human dignity and freedom are incomplete, knowledge is like the ocean. Buddha said that before joining the Sangh, ascetics, Brahmins, and monks, and all individuals were like a river or a small stream, but after joining the Sangh, the identity of caste and creed disappeared. In other words, the Sangh is also like that ocean. Without knowledge, man is nothing, today 90% of Indians are uneducated and 90% of the Barmas are educated, the reason is that Brahmanism does not want to educate us, so we should move towards Buddhism, which gives knowledge, respect, and equality. My second deity is self-respect and the third deity is character. The teaching of character has been obtained from Buddha, character has great importance in Buddhism. Wisdom, self-respect, and character have supported me in every step of my struggle.

Struggle for human dignity and freedom - Dr. Ambedkar's birth was in the lowest class of the Brahminical system, he was deprived of education, wealth, and respect. His childhood and education were very difficult, he also suffered the slavery of Brahmanism along with the British felt insulted and despised life in Indian society, there was no freedom for the untouchables to enter wells, ponds, or temples, even though being in the post of General Accountant, Assistant Professor, and Barrister, Baba Saheb had to suffer humiliation. Therefore, to liberate the insulted person from the animal-like life and to provide a dignified life, he struggled.

Influence of Buddhism in the struggle against untouchability - Just as Buddha rejected the caste system and showed the path of equality. Inspired by him, Baba Saheb fought for the untouchables and presented a representation before the South Bureau Commission in 1918 for the rights of the socially and economically backward society. Later, in 1925, he burned the Manusmriti, which had deprived the dignity of the Shudras and untouchables. In 1927, he conducted the Mahad Chavdar Talab Satyagraha for drinking water, in 1930, he conducted the Kalaram Temple Satyagraha for God. Along with this, a proposal was submitted for the rights of members before the Simon Commission, later, he warned the British about the problems and atrocities in the three Round Table Conferences and gave separate voting rights. To reach his thoughts to the public, he published newspapers, in which "Mooknayak" was the first magazine, which was the voice of the dumb people for centuries. After that, through magazines like "Samta", and "Bahiskrit Bharat", he struggled for the oppressed society. He was elected as a member of the Mumbai Legislative Assembly in 1927 and 1932, established the "Samta Samaj Sangh" in 1929, and raised his voice for Dalits and the oppressed. In 1932, he signed the Pune Pact, and he wrote many books on the struggle against untouchability, including "Who Were the Untouchables?", "Who Were the Sudra ?", "Riddle of Hinduism",

Annihilation of the Caste." All the movements and struggles Dr. Ambedkar undertook were non-violent and legal, which was the influence of Buddha's path.

Buddha's influence can be seen in the struggle for laborers and farmers- Buddha opposed animal sacrifice and advocated for the welfare of farmers. He preached compassion and provided support to the helpless. Similarly, Dr. Ambedkar fought for the rights of laborers and farmers because India's progress lies in their development. Without Dr. Ambedkar, one cannot imagine India's upliftment. He established the "Independent Labour Party" on 15th August 1936 and led a strike of over a lakh laborers on 7th November 1938. He also led elected representatives to the assembly to voice the concerns of laborers. In 1928, he introduced the Maternity Benefit Bill for female laborers, and in 1942, he reduced working hours from 14 to 8. In 1943, he secured recognition for labor unions, fighting for the upliftment of India's oppressed classes and striving to free them from exploitation.

Buddha's influence is evident in the struggle for oppressed women - Just as Buddha made efforts for the upliftment of women, he opened doors for women's entry into the Sangha, including those considered outcasts like prostitutes. Baba Sahab inspired by Buddha and worked for Indian women was granted education, property, voting rights, and the right to divorce through the Hindu Code Bill. This was the greatest work for human dignity and freedom.

Buddha's influence is seen in the constitutional provisions - Dr. Ambedkar ensured equality, freedom, and rights against exploitation in the fundamental rights for the oppressed in the constitution. Article 17 abolished untouchability and provided policy directives for dignity and complete life. Provisions were made for the freedom, and equality of women, reservation for backward classes, and the establishment of a democratic system, reflecting the glimpses of democracy in Buddha's sangha. Contemporary states like Mall and Vajji also had democratic systems. Article 51 directed states for the development of scientific outlook, thus expanding Buddha's ideologies through constitutional provisions. Emperor Ashoka's Dhamma Chakra was embraced in the Indian flag, and the Ashoka emblem was declared the national emblem, giving recognition to Buddhism.

Acceptance of Buddhist religion - Baba Sahab Ambedkar had long been attempting reforms within Hinduism to provide justice and self-respect to the oppressed, but there was no change in the hearts of the upper caste. Despite constitutional provisions, untouchability and exploitation persisted. Therefore, he considered a religious change. Influenced by Buddha's teachings, he had already announced his intention to convert to Buddhism in 1935. For this, he established Siddharth College and Milind College in Aurangabad. He prepared 5 acres of land in Bangalore for a Buddhist circle, aiming to open a centre there for comparative study of religions. He was encouraging Buddhist education and efforts to revive it. He wanted to build Buddhist viharas in Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, and Madras and founded the "Buddhist Society of India" in 1955, later known as the "Indian Buddhist Association." On 18th March 1956, he called upon people in Agra, saying, "I will soon embrace the Dharma of the Tathagata Buddha. This is a progressive religion. I have found this religion after many years of effort. Now I will soon become a Buddhist. Then as a true Buddhist, I will continue to struggle for your welfare. I will not ask you to become Buddhist with me because I do not want blind followers, only those who desire to come into the refuge of this great religion can embrace Buddhism and live with strong faith in this religion and follow its practices." Later, on 14th October 1956, Baba Sahab took the oath of Buddhism along with lakhs of followers in Nagpur. At BBC London, Baba Sahab said, "I prioritize Buddhism, which emphasizes compassion and wisdom, beneficial for human well-being on Earth, and can connect the entire world with the feelings of peace, happiness, and brotherhood."

Conclusion

In this way, we can say that Baba Sahab Dr. Ambedkar was greatly influenced by the path of Buddha during his lifetime, which brought him before the world's great scholars. He became the architect of the world's largest constitution, earning him the title "Symbol of Knowledge." It is said that the Indian government awarded him the Bharat Ratna. In the Buddhist world, he is known as Bodhisattva Baba Sahab Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar.

Reference

1. Arnold, Edwin, The light of Asia, Intellectual book centre, Dariyaganj, 1996
2. Ambedkar, Bhimrao, The Buddha and his Dhamma, Buddham publishers, Jaypur, 2017
3. Ambedkar Bhimrao, The constitution of India, Buddham publishers jaypur, 2018
4. Ambedkar, Bhimrao, Revolution and counter Revolution, Sudhir prakashan, 2021
5. Ambedkar, Bhimrao, Annihilation of caste, Maple press, noeda, 2021
6. Ambedkar, Bhimrao, Who were the Shudras, Prabhat prakashan, 2022
7. Ambedkar, Bhimrao, The untouchable, Namaskar books, 2023
8. Bhagirath, Bharat ka Itihas, Samyak prakashan, 2017
9. Chavan, Sheshrao, True Faces of Gandhi and Ambedkar, Atlantic publishers, 2021
10. Cunningham, Alexander, The Ancient Geography of India, Gyan publishing house, 2021
11. Kamble, Savita, Bhagwan Budhha, Dr. Ambedkar aur Budhha sanskriti, Samyak prakashan, 2019
12. Keer, Dhananjay, Dr. Baba saheb Ambedkar life and mission, Populer prakashan, 1954
13. Sahare, M. L., Dr. B.R. Ambedkar struggles and massage, Samyak prakashan, 2016
14. Vasnik, Vinay kumar, Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar aur golmege sammelan, Samyak prakashan 2022
15. Vhensang, Vhensang ki Bharat yatra, Samyak prakashan, 2019