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**INSPIRATION OF THE BUDDHIST TEACHINGS TO  
ENHANCE DR. B. R. AMBEDKAR'S THOUGHTS AND  
PHILOSOPHY**

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## Inspiration of the Buddhist Teachings to Enhance Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Thoughts and Philosophy

### Abstract

As a social reformer, economist, politician, and jurist Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's thoughts and philosophy are based on social equality, free will, and democracy. For thousands of years, people have been suffering due to the social degradation, inequality, and slavery in Hindu society. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was a savior of oppressed, downtrodden millions of people who were graded as the lowest caste according to Hinduism. He concluded a solution from Buddhism for unjustified social issues and embraced Buddhism with a large fraternity as a historic revival. Buddhism emphasizes that every individual is congenitally endowed with similar dignity, opportunity, and potentiality. The Buddha rejected grading based on birth and introduced grading according to behavior and act. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's thoughts and philosophy interrelated with Buddhism and Buddhism cherished his thoughts and philosophy.

According to his viewpoint society must be based on justice and equity and not on unfair traditional caste customs. He deliberates caste as an enclosure and a closed system in the open class system. Effective education helps people move from caste to class or from a closed system to an open system. He believed that education could change society and expand the potential of individuals. His philosophy emphasized the importance of education and stated "education, organize and agitate" for success.

**Keywords:** Athi-Sudra, Class, Caste, Downtrodden, Education, *Samānatmatā*

## **Introduction**

He criticizes the social division of classes due to the harm and oppression that occur in a set of people's lives without fair causes. He clarifies further that traditional Hinduism divides classes such as Brahmin, kings/warriors, merchants, and helotry. Dalits are one of the Subdivisions of helotry (Athi-Sudra) and are considered outcasts or untouchables. The first four castes take all the privilege and helotries are always neglected and rejected. He promoted Buddhism, education, inter-caste marriages, and rejection of unfair religious beliefs to bring social equality and human dignity to all oppressed people.

## **Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Thoughts and Philosophy**

### **Birth and Education**

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was born in the lowest caste Dalit in India. He is a respected and reputed Indian civilian. He is known as the "father of the Indian constitution", political leader, freedom fighter, free thinker, social reformer, and philosopher. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was honored by the Nation through 'BHARAT RATNA' posthumously which was received in 1990. His original name was Sakpal but his father admitted him to a school as Ambadawekar. Later his Marathi Brahmin teacher Krishnaji Keshav Ambedkar changed his name to Ambedkar. He was born on April 14, 1891, in Mhow City and passed away on December 6, 1956. His parents were Ramji Maloji Sakpal, an army officer and Bhimabai sakapal. His family background was Marathi, Dalit caste, known as untouchables. For thousands of years, Dalits were subjected to social discrimination.

He attended school as a child and later explained the discrimination he faced in the school classes. The schoolmasters did not allow him to sit inside the class with other Brahmin and higher caste students. In his book letter, he says "No peon, No water" because when he wants to drink water someone who belongs to a higher caste must pour water without touching him. The water was given by the school peon and when he absented on the days he stayed without water.<sup>i</sup> He graduated from Elphinstone College, Bombay University, Columbia University, and the London School of Economics. He is the first from the Mahar caste elected to a university. In 1935 He was appointed as principal of the Government Law College, Mumbai, and later chairman of the body of Ramjas College University in Delhi. In 1918 he worked as a professor of politics and economy at Sydenham College of Commerce and Economics. During his career life, other professors in the college did not share at least drinking water with him. His parents arranged his marriage with Ramabai in 1906.<sup>ii</sup>

## Challenges

He served the Indian government as a jurist, economist, social reformer, and political leader. He headed the Indian constitutional committee and worked as a Law and Justice Minister in the first cabinet of Jawaharlal Nehru. He wrote himself a set of recommendations for the constitution of India.<sup>iii</sup> Exceptionally he inspired the Dalits to convert to Buddhism. He was involved in campaigning and negotiations for India's independence. In 1956 he converted to Buddhism with thousands of Dalits supporting the negotiation of social freedom of Dalits.<sup>iv</sup> He said, "As soon as the wife of Brahmin conceives, she thinks of the High Court whether any post of a judge has fallen vacant but when our women become pregnant, she cannot think of anything better than a sweeper's post under the Municipal Corporation", because according to the Hinduism, only higher castes have been benefited beside

Sudras and other outcaste people have nothing to gain from Hinduism. In 1919 he argued while preparing the Government of India Act in Southborough due to separation of electorates and reservation for Dalits and other religious groups. In 1932 the British government designed the formation of a separate electorate for depressed classes. As a result of the new formation, on 25th September 1932, a Poona Pact agreement was signed between Ambedkar and Madan Mohan Majaviya. Depressed classes received 148 seats in the legislature instead of 71. He founded the Independent Labor Party in 1936 and continued political movements. In 1936 he composed *Annihilation of Caste* and criticized Hindu religious orthodox.

### **Inspiration of Buddhist Teachings**

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar studied prominent religions and finally decided to convert to Buddhism because the central teachings of Buddhism endowed with morality, equality, compassion, and wisdom.

Buddhists believe in equality. Understanding the vision and mission of Dr. Ambedkar as a prominent anti-caste activist and practitioner is vital to understanding the issues related to the Indian caste system. 1500-1000BCE in the Vedic period only existed four classifications according to their Varna which was known as *caturvarna* in Hinduism. It is reported for the first time in *Purusha Sukta* in *Rig Veda*. *Rig Veda* the four Varnas appeared in this world by the body part of the *Purusha*. Varna means the hereditary roots which include an individual's color, type, order, or caste. The classification contains four groups; Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras, priests, kings, trades, or farmers and laborers. Brahmins constitute *Purusha's* mouth, Kshatriyas its arms, Vaishyas its thighs, and Shudras its feet. According to the hierarchy, modern Dalits are lower than Shudras. They are concerned about castes and untouchables.

Further officially recognized by the name "scheduled caste". They were known as Harigana, Adidravida, Adi Karnataka, and Adiandra.<sup>v</sup> Each Varna must obey the principles mentioned in the sacred texts and cannot exceed the rules in Manusmriti. Buddhist canon also proves the existence of a caste system from the ancient period. The Madhura Sutta, the Kaṇṇakatthaka Sutta, and the Assalāyana Sutta of Majjima Nikāya mention about the four castes. Other castes must serve Brahmin and Khashtiryas. This is the oldest social stratification that exists in the world today. (about 3000 years) The modern caste system is divided into about 3000 castes and 25000 sub-castes based on occupations. However, discrimination based on the caste system is illegal according to the Indian constitution.

In this system, specified castes occupy social and economic opportunities according to the hierarchy. They always live in separated villages or colonies, marry only within castes, and do not accept even food from law caste people. Neither accept nor share even water of the same well. Modern Indian government to control this social issue announced government job quotas and educational institutes for law caste people. According to the reports of Human Rights Watch (HRW), Dalits are separated by segregation in housing, schools, temples, water sources, and other access to public services.<sup>vi</sup>

All Buddhas appear in this world to guide the whole world toward the end-suffering. People suffer due to self-made social frames in their lives and religious beliefs which make their lives difficult and mislead. The people who come to the light of the Buddha's teaching live a happy and dignified life as human beings. From time to time wise people like B. R. Ambedkar practice Buddhist philosophy for the benevolence of the oppressed and degraded people like Dalits. As a result of his fight against the social unfairness basis of the caste system Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was concerned as a Bodhisattva. His

works related to social clearance are accepted as Ambedkar Buddhism among the Dalit and other Indian Buddhists. His literary works reflect his philosophy. The most important thing is his viewpoint on social unfairness. He completely accepted the Buddha's teaching on social fairness neglecting ethnicity, color, caste, class, wealth, gender, etc. Buddha says,

*na jaccā vasalo hoti - na jaccā hoti brāhmano*  
*kammanā vasalo hoti - kammanā hoti brāhmano*

"It is not the birth that makes a noble or an ignoble person, but it is one's actions that determine whether one is a noble person or an ignoble person"

The Buddha rejected social stratification considering one's birth. He emphasized that nobleness or ignobleness depends on behavior. The *Vasala sutta* of *Suttanipāta* elucidates the nature of the outcast people and nobles. The term "*Vasala*" means outcast or untouchable.

"Whosoever is angry, harbors hatred, and is reluctant to speak well of others (discredits the good of others), perverted in views, deceitful- know him as an outcast."

"Whosoever in this world kills living beings, once born or twice-born, in whom there is no sympathy for living beings - know him as an outcast."

"Whosoever destroys and besieges villages and hamlets and becomes notorious as an oppressor - know him as an outcast."

"Be it in the village, or the forest, whosoever steals what belongs to others, what is not given to him - know him as an outcast."

"Whosoever having incurred a debt runs away when he is pressed to pay, saying, 'I owe no debt to you' - know him as an outcast."

"Whosoever covets anything, kills a person going along the road, and grabs whatever that person has - know him as an outcast."

"He who for his own sake or the sake of others or the sake of wealth, utters lies when questioned as a witness - know him as an outcast."

"Whosoever by force or with consent associates with the wives of relatives or friends - know him as an outcast."

"Whosoever person wealthy supports, not his mother and father who have grown old - know him as an outcast."

"Whosoever strikes and annoys by (harsh) speech, mother, father, brother, sister or mother-in-law or father-in-law - know him as an outcast."

"Whosoever when questioned about what is good, says what is detrimental, and talks in an evasive manner- know him as an outcast."

"Whosoever having committed an evil deed wishes that it may not be known to others, and commits evil in secret - know him as an outcast."

"Whosoever having gone to another's house, and partaken of choice food, does not honor that host by offering food when he repays the visit - know him as an outcast."

"Whosoever deceives by uttering lies, a Brahman or an ascetic, or any other mendicant - know him as an outcast."

"Whosoever, when a Brahman or ascetic appears during mealtime, angers him by harsh speech, and does not offer him (any alms) - know him as an outcast."



"Whosoever in this world, shrouded in ignorance, speaks harsh words or falsehood expecting to gain something - know him as an outcast."

"Whosoever debased by his pride exalts himself and belittles others - know him as an outcast."

"Whosoever is given to anger, is miserly, has base desires, and is selfish, deceitful, shameless and fearless (in doing evil) - know him as an outcast."

"Whosoever reviles the Enlightened One (the Buddha), or a disciple of the Buddha, recluse or a householder - know him as an outcast."

"Whosoever not being an arahant, a Consummate One, pretends to be so, is a thief in the whole universe - he is the lowest of outcasts."

"Not by birth is one an outcast; not by birth is one a Brahman. By deed one becomes an outcast, by deed one becomes a Brahman."<sup>vii</sup>

The end of the sutta explains about the Arahata Sopaka who belongs to an outcaste by birth but attained Arahatahip. After completion of the Arahatahip Buddha addressed him by the name "pursiājañña" the Greatest Person who was entitled to be worshiped by even Mahābrahma. The Kālamāsutta of the Aṅguttara Nikāya explains greed, delusion, and aversion arise in the human mind and cause harm, and not for welfare. Therefore the Buddha emphasized the significance of one's sense of right or wrong to make some decisions. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar used his sense of right and wrong as the Buddha mentioned in the Kālamāsuttta. He rejected traditional beliefs without hesitation and introduced the common good for the welfare of the oppressed companions.

"Now, Kalamas, don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, 'This contemplative is our teacher.' When you know that, 'These qualities are skillful; these qualities are blameless; these qualities are praised by the wise; these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to welfare & happiness" - then you should enter & remain in them.<sup>viii</sup>

He periodically published Mook Nayak, (Silent Leader) Bahiskrit Bharat, and Equality Janta to preserve Dalit rights. He protested for public drinking water consumption and the right to enter Hindu temples since 1927. He openly criticized Manusmriti and ceremonially burned copies of the text. Every 25th December of the year Dalits celebrated "Munsmruti Dahan Din" Munusmruti burning day with Ambedkar.

From childhood to death he was oppressed as a student, university lecturer, politician, and Hindu devotee. He faced all the challenges as a social reformer and he was a pioneer of lower caste people. He was endowed with rare leadership qualities and always guided his people to improve three traits such as education, organizing skills, and agitation. People who are in power use others' weak points to control them. If a group of people is ignorant, cloven, and cowardly, they are oppressed without any mercy. The same thing happened to Dalits in Hindu society. Therefore Dr. Ambedkar strengthened his people by emphasizing the importance of education, unity, and fighting back for their rights. He always fought against uncommon central teachings of Hinduism, which looked down upon or degraded people based on the caste system. The Buddha also mentions education, morality, and other skills can change weak people into strong capable civilians. Once he advised King Kosala when he was upset due to his queen delivering a baby girl,

*"Itthi ' pi hi kachina seyya posa janadhipa  
medhavini silavati sassudeva patibbata.  
Tassa yo jayati poso suro hoti disampati  
evam subhagiya putto rajjam ' pi anusasati"*

"A woman child, O lord of men, may prove Even a better offspring than a male. She may grow up wise and virtuous, Her husband's mother reverencing, true wife. She may bear a child who does great deeds, And rule great realms, yea, such a son Of noble wife becomes his country's guide."<sup>ix</sup>

King Kosala thought women were weak and his kingdom would deteriorate without a powerful king after him. But Buddha said if you give proper education, discipline, and other skills any person considered weak in society according to tradition, can become more powerful and potential. The same method was practiced by Dr. D. R. Ambedkar. He wanted to educate and improve the skills of the individuals in his caste. Manusmriti says that women do not have the educational opportunity. Manusmriti says,

"By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood, a female must be subject to her father. In youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent."

"No sacrifice, no vow, no fast must be performed by a woman (apart from their husbands). If a wife obeys her husband, she will for that (reason alone) be exalted in heaven"

But Ambedkar fights against it. Not only for education but also for his contribution to the cultural emancipation of women. Once he said,

"I measure the progress of the community by the degree of progress which women have achieved"

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

For the first time, more than 25000 women participated in the Mahila conference on 20 July 1942 in India. These movements awakened illiterate women and helped to change their opinions. Later they fought against the Hindu custom of child marriages and the practice of Devadasi. Leading as the chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution of India included women's rights in the Indian constitution.

Article - 14 Equal rights and opportunities in political, economic, and social spheres.

Article - 15 Prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sex.

Article - 15 (3) Enables affirmative discrimination in favor of women.

Article - 39 Equal means of livelihood and equal pay for equal work.

Article - 42 Just and human conditions of work and maternity relief.

Article - 46 the state to promote with special care, the educational and economic interests of the weaker section of the people and to protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.

Article - 47 The state to raise the level of nutrition and standard of living of its people and the improvement of public health and so on.

Article - 51 (A) (c) Fundamental duties to renounce practice, derogatory to the dignity of women.

Article 243 D (3), 243T (3), and 243R (4) provide for the allocation of seats in the Panchayat Raj System.<sup>x</sup>

He published 'The Riddle of the Women', 'The Women and the Counter-Revolution', and 'The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Women' to educate women on contemporary social issues based on gender discrimination. The Buddhist teachings guide him and educate him on this matter. The Buddha was once the basis of Kundalakesi Their story emphasized the intellectual capacity of the women as follows,

*na so sabbesu tānesu puriso hoti paṇḍito  
ittīpi paṇḍitā honti tattha tattha vicakkhanā*

## **Conclusion**

He always admires social unity free from rationalism, religious fundamentalism, and other divisions based on languages, etc. He says "So long as we have these differences of Hindu, Muslim and others, or Sindhi Madrasi etc, we can never develop our nationality"<sup>xi</sup> Ancient Indian philosophers, ascetics, and religious leaders introduced and developed many religious and philosophical notions that improve the human knowledge and believes. From ancient times to today the Eastern world has experienced freedom of thinking and believing. Because of great freedom of thinking Dr. Ambedkar challenged ancient Hinduism and developed his philosophy based on one of the central teachings of Buddhism; equanimity.

## End Notes

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- <sup>iii</sup> Ambedkar, B. R. (1979). *Writings and Speeches*. Vol. 1. Education Dept., Govt. of Maharashtra.
- <sup>iv</sup> Buswell, Robert Jr; Lopez, Donald S. Jr., eds. (2013). *Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. p. 34.
- <sup>v</sup> Mendelsohn, Oliver; Vicziany, Marika (1998). *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India*. Cambridge University Press. p. 3.
- <sup>vi</sup> "India: "Hidden Apartheid" of Discrimination Against Dalits" Human Rights Watch. 27 May 2002.
- <sup>vii</sup> Vasala Sutta, Suttanipata
- <sup>viii</sup> Kālamasutta, Aṅguttaranikāya
- <sup>ix</sup> Samyuttanikāya, Vol. I. 86
- <sup>x</sup> Government of India: "The National Policy for the empowerment of Women 2001" Department of Women and Child Development, New Delhi, 2001.
- <sup>xi</sup> Dr. S. Radha Krishan, A. Treu Patriot. B.R. Ambedkar and Human Rights, Vivek Publishing, Delhi.