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Ambedkar and his Navayana Buddhism

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar or Babasaheb Ambedkar is still considered the person who revived Buddhism in India and brought relief for all the suppressed castes. However, looking back, nearly after a century, Indian statistics do not indicate any increase in the number of Buddhists in India.

The total Buddhist population has remained around 0.07%, while in some states it is only 0.01. In Maharashtra, where Ambedkar conducted most of his campaign, it is still, 5.81%. In contrast, the Muslim population had grown to 14.4 % and Christians to 2.3%.

All the suppressed and oppressed people in India, not only among Dalits, which include 'untouchables', but also among all Indians, still continue to suffer social and economic injustice. Ambedkar failed as a religious reformer, a savior of the untouchables, or as a political leader.

With all his education and familiarity with both Eastern and Western culture, and his superficial studies of all world religions, he may have concluded that there was no real solution to alleviate the suffering of a majority of his countrymen. It is probably his disappointment of the various forms of 'Buddhisms' then found in India, which led him to create his own version of Buddhism, or *Navayana*.

Ambedkar should have killed the *avatar* he mistook as Buddha. Then he would have seen the real Buddha through his *Dhamma*, not the legend and the legendary Buddha created by many different Buddhisms, as he describes in his last book, 'Buddha and His Dhamma'. Ambedkar, published his book 'Buddha and His Dhamma' giving us his interpretation of Buddha Dhamma, which he called Navayana, in place of Hinayana and Mahayana.

If he had tried to find the grain hidden amidst all the chaff accumulated over two and a half millennia, he should have seen that what was needed was not a new "Buddhism" or conversion" to a new "religion" but reawaken the inherent noble loving kindness in all human beings. Then we would not be disturbing or questioning the faiths and beliefs of others,

arouse suspicion and mistrust, leading to conflict and even violence. Had he really understood Buddha's teaching, Ambedkar would have worked with the leaders of Hindu society, instead of fighting them, or antagonizing them. He should never have resorted to cheap public stunts like burning the sacred *manusmṛti* in public, or mass conversions, which only changed a pseudo label.

Buddha would not have tried to "convert" anyone to any "religion". Any attempt to convert would also create confusion as more and more chaff had been added over the grain, creating so many different versions of the many different "Buddhisms" which have evolved into "religions" almost like the other Revealed Religions.

He should have studied Swami Vivekananda, instead of following western writers like Edwin Arnold.

Vivekananda had never tried to convert anyone. "I do not come", said Swami Vivekananda on one occasion in America, "to convert you to a new belief. I want you to keep your own belief; I want to make the Methodist a better Methodist; the Presbyterian a better Presbyterian; the Unitarian a better Unitarian. I want to teach you to live the truth, to reveal the light within your own soul." Ambedkar too should have tried to make the Hindu a better Hindu, or all Indians better Indians.

The concept of 'conversion' came to South Asia only with the mass scale arrival of the theistic or revealed 'religions'. There would not have been a concept of 'religion' as the West understood it, and hence no concept of 'religious conversion' in ancient India. They did not have, and to my knowledge we still do not have, equivalent terms for 'religion' and 'conversion' in any of the South Asian languages.

The idea that Ashoka 'converted to Buddhism' was also a mistranslation of his inscriptions, by Europeans first, and later by Western educated South Asians.

Conversion did not solve the social and economic issues of many untouchables who sought refuge in other religions, which told them that all human beings are the children of one creator God. We still read about their pathetic situation in Dalit Literature. Several incidents are reported in *Dalit Voice, Literature and Revolt*, Edited by Sharankuma Limbale & Jaydeep Sarangi.

Ambedkar claimed that if Buddhism continued to be an intimidating and highly institutionalized order of renunciants, priests and intellectuals, it would never be able to absorb India's Untouchables. That paved the way for Navayana. But He could not take Buddha's message to either his own people or the rest of the Indian population.

In Book IV, of his 'Buddha and his Dhamma', he talks about religion, even though he uses the term often to include Buddha Dhamma, while saying, religion connotes - belief in God, belief in soul, worship of God, curing of the erring, and propitiating God by prayer, ceremonies, sacrifices etc." p. 316

Did Ambedkar explain all these problems, to the half a million people he had 'converted' in one day, one gathering, within a few hours. Did people understand that Buddha was a normal human being, that his message was not 'gospel', that it was not prayer and worship or offerings which mattered, but each to find his own salvation? Did his words help a million people to understand that the Buddha did not show a *moksha data* but only a *marga data*?

Then we are faced with another question, did Ambedkar himself follow this *marga data*?

Ambedkar's Navayana didn't accept the Four Noble Truths because if suffering was everything, a social order could never be established. If Ambedkar rejected the Four Noble Truths, then Navayana is not Buddha Dhamma, nor could it even be a just another Buddhism.

Ambedkar interpreted *dukkha* as collective social suffering - suffering that is socially constituted and historically specific and conquered only via a creed that placed suffering at the centre of its ethical structure - ie, it was Buddhism that could relieve the Untouchables from their discrimination and denigration at the hands of caste Hindus. In conclusion it should be observed that most of his half a million followers believed his interpretation of Buddhism, and he probably did more harm to his people by his attempt at 'conversion'.