

DR. AMBEDKAR AND CONVERSION TO BUDDHISM

I heard of Dr. Ambedkar for the first time in 1924, when I went to England for my higher studies. Shortly before this Dr. Ambedkar had passed out of the University of London, after having obtained his D.Sc. degree in Economics for his thesis on "The Problem of the Rupee". The academic atmosphere then was surcharged with the intellectual attainments of Dr. Ambedkar and he was almost invariably the subject of talk amongst the Indian students. However, it was not till 1952 when I was elected to the Rajya Sabha, that I had the privilege of having some contact with Dr. Ambedkar as his colleague. Unfortunately Dr. Ambedkar was, as he himself put it, "An ailing man" then. He made only a few speeches during that period. But one could not fail to be impressed by the maturity of his thought and experience. He could easily be marked out as a thinker of eminence and a great leader of men.

It was, however, the study of Buddhism that gave a new dimension to his thinking and deepened his insight into the social problems of his country. Dr. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in the summer of 1956 at Nagpur is unquestionably a great event in the history of the movement for the uplift of the Scheduled Classes in this country. Till then that movement was, as it were, a movement for the reform of Hindu religion and society and for the emancipation and upliftment of the lowest castes amongst the Hindus.

From a rational point of view conversions in the past have meant little more than a mere substitution of one set of superstitions for another. In all dogmatic religions, there is a certain system of beliefs and propositions about the nature of reality, which, being contrary to science, can be demonstrated to be palpably wrong. All rites and rituals appropriate to a particular

dogmatic religion, postulate and assume the truth of some such body of propositions which appear to have not the slightest evidence in support of them.

In Hinduism, for instance, the cosmological beliefs that lie behind yajñas (sacrifices), the Karma theory, the theory of the existence and transmigration of the soul as apart from the body, the belief in the divine origin of the Vedas etc., and which are at the root of the various Hindu religious injunctions and customs; and the subtle reasoning which is employed to defend these are little short of the unfoldings of diseased and perverted though acute intellects. The same is true of Christian and Mohamedan religious rites and beliefs also. It is sad to think of how the followers of the great minds like Jesus or Mohamed have perverted their teachings and brought misery to millions of men.

Buddhism was really a massive revolt against such superstitious beliefs and practices amongst the Hindus. A rational mind like that of Gautam Buddha could not tolerate the evil practices that were rampant in the Hindu society of those days in the name of religion. There were rumblings of such revolts even before the time of the Buddha. Perhaps Cārvāka was one of the first to revolt against such superstitious beliefs and practices. It was characteristic of his way of reasoning to point out that if a goat which is slain in a sacrifice goes to heaven which is supposed to be the end that the performer of the sacrifice aims at, then it would be as well to sacrifice the father of such performer in that religious rite, so that he could be secured a heavenly abode without any difficulty. Several of the incisive arguments that later reformers of Hinduism have advanced against some of the Hindu rites, customs and beliefs are unquestionably inspired by the relentless reasoning of Cārvāka.

If we carefully read the life story and the teaching of the Buddha we cannot fail to be impressed by his essentially rational and non-speculative approach to the problems of human life. He

was evidently dissatisfied with the solution that Hinduism offered of these problems "If we place ourselves in imagination in the India of the sixth century B.C." says Dr. Radha Krishnan, "We find that different streams of thought, belief and practice, animism, magic and superstition—were tending to unite in a higher monistic Idealism"—"Life does not begin at birth or end at death but is a link in an infinite series of life each of which is conditioned and determined by acts done in previous existence—Release from the round of births resulting in life in Eternity—Mokṣa or Deliverance is the goal of the religious man. This end was to be achieved according to Hinduism by following the injunctions of the Vedas."* It must have been obvious to the Buddha that all these and similar conceptions with regard to the end of human life and the means adopted by men to attain it, involved an element of speculation and supernatural belief if not mere superstition. Who could say, for instance, what sort of a place Svarga or Heaven was and whether sacrifice of animals was the appropriate method of attaining it.

Both in his method of approach to such problems and their solutions the Buddha was a rationalist and a realist to the core. In the Anguttara Nikāya the Buddha says—

"This I have said to you, O' Kalamas; but you may accept it, not because it is the report, not because it is a tradition, not because it is so said in the past, not because it is given from the Scripture, not for the sake of discussion, not for the sake of a particular method, not for the sake of careful consideration, not for the sake of forbearing with wrong views, not because it appears to be suitable, not because your preceptor is a recluse; but if you yourself understand that this is so meritorious and blameless, and, when accepted, it is for benefit and happiness, then you may accept it."

*(Codanālakṣaṇo artho dharmah). (चोदनालक्षणोऽर्थो धर्मः)

In the 'Mahatanhasankhaya Sutta', the following conversation is recorded :

“ Would you then, mendicants, thus knowing, thus seeing, say thus, ‘ Esteemed is our teacher and out of esteem for the teacher we say thus’. “ Not so, revered Sir ”. “ What you say, mendicants, is it not what you yourselves know, yourselves perceive, yourselves have comprehended ?” “ It is so, revered, Sir ”

The Buddha is equally critical of mere speculative philosophy. He lived in a period “ when many professed to have a direct knowledge of God. They tell us with assurance not only whether He is or is not but also what He thinks, wills and does. The Buddha convicts many of them of putting on spiritual airs ”. In the 'Tevijja Sutta' he declares that the teachers, who talk about Brahma have not seen Him face to face. They are like a man in love who cannot say who the lady is, or like one who builds a staircase without knowing where the palace is to be, or like one wishing to cross the river who should call the other side to come to him. “ Our theories of the Eternal, according to the Buddha, are as valuable as those which a chick which has not broken its way through its shell might form of the outside world.”

Such being the approach of the Buddha to human problems it is no wonder that a rational and critical mind like that of Dr. Ambedkar which was naturally moving away from Hinduism or for that matter from any dogmatic religion, should be attracted towards Buddhism. For him all dogmatic religions contain a body of propositions about reality which are inconsistent with the discoveries and truth of modern science; and in so far as this is the case, these propositions must be rejected and with them the dogmatic religions also of which they form an integral part. Buddhism in his view—and I may say quite rightly—was the only religion which realised that religion does not and ought not to depend for its validity on any such dogmas or metaphysical propositions about the nature of reality.

There was another reason why Dr. Ambedkar turned away from Hinduism. In his view the very core of Hinduism was Varnashrama Dharma, i.e. religion based on caste and stages in life viz. (1) celibacy, (2) married life, (3) retreat to forest and (4) complete retirement from worldly life. So far as the Ashramas were concerned there was perhaps nothing wrong about them; but the concept of caste was completely opposed to the democratic principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. And what was the justification for retaining caste in modern democratic society. They were not based on any distinctions in Nature at all. It may be that they were a living force in a certain state of Hindu society and served men's interest at that stage. But like several other institutions which do not keep pace with a changing environment and consequent social change conscious or unconscious, they have become mere fossils now and are indeed a dead weight on the more progressive forces and mere hurdles on the path of the development of a healthy society.

Moreover, once the democratic principle was introduced in our society it was bound to tend towards an egalitarian society socially and economically. Equality in the right to franchise must ultimately tend to the levelling of disparities of every kind. Even a slave, once he is given the right to vote, is not likely to vote for a state of society in which he will be perpetually reduced to the status of an underdog. To quote the prophetic words of Dr. Ambedkar, "On January 26, 1950, we will have equality in politics and inequality in social and economic life. We must remove this contradiction at the earliest moment, or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy....".

The logical force of Buddha's teachings and later Buddhist thoughts had evidently made a great impact on Hinduism as it then was; and thinkers have to find out some way out of it to save Hinduism. This was done by the Adi Shankaracharya. By

his philosophical teachings Śankara pointed out that every human soul was merely the manifestation of the one Brahma or the Universal Soul and that in truth and essence men were all equal. The story of how Śankara met the Chandala and how the Chandala brought out the logical consequences of his theory are very instructive in this connection. It also illustrates how along with the heights of philosophical thinking can co-exist an influence of traditions which is contrary to that line of thinking. It will be recalled in this connection that in spite of all his philosophical acumen Śankara had asked the Chandala to move out of his way in the traditional orthodox fashion and that was followed by discussion with the Chandala in which Śankara had to admit his mistake.

It is true that the rigour of Hindu ritualism was greatly softened by the philosophical teachings of Śankara which have now percolated to the lowest strata of Hindu social hierarchy and have been incorporated in the teachings of the great saints of this country. In Maharashtra saints like Jnaneswara, Ekanath, Tukaram, Chokha Mela and others reflected the basic social attitudes towards the humble and the downtrodden. But it can not be denied that with all these teachings, the traditional inequalities of caste with all its evils have remained for all these centuries the central core of the Hindu society.

Dr. Ambedkar was thus quite right in thinking that Hinduism in practice would be an obstacle to healthy social developments and political democracy in this country. This was then another reason why he thought of Buddhism which he rightly considers was very modern in its way of thinking and would be an answer to the social disparities created by Hinduism.

The question, however, is whether mere formal conversion would solve the problem of social disparities. It seems to me that social disparities, apart from the religious and traditional ones, have a much deeper social origin and that they are embedded

in the invidious idea that intellectual labour has a greater intrinsic economic value than mere physical labour. It is difficult even for modern socialist to think of equating the economic value of intellectual labour with that of mere physical labour. It is difficult even for him to imagine that a person who spends an hour in polishing of shoes should be paid the same wages as a lawyer who spends an hour in legal work. That would seem to him very strange indeed and this prejudice is embedded in human beings for ages past. It would be recalled in this connection, how as great a thinker as Plato distinguished between two kinds of inhabitants of a Republic, the citizen and the slave. It did not strike him to think of a political organisation where all citizens had equal rights and where there were no slaves at all. The British Empire which co-existed with democracy in Great Britain did not strike as very odd or self-contradictory to the political thinkers of the nineteenth century. On the contrary it should be clear that it was merely an extension of the political ideas of Plato as applied to a different environment. The doctrine of Śankara was no doubt a great improvement on this. But as I have said, it co-existed in Hindu society with a state of religious inequality which was directly opposed to his doctrine. The fact of the matter is that if we are serious about creating an egalitarian society we must quickly move away from the concept that economic and social value of man has any direct relation to his mental or physical capacity. Whether it is knowledge or physical capacity it must be regarded as being wholly irrelevant to purchasing power of an individual in society.

When you strip Hinduism or for that matter any dogmatic religion of all the propositions which are contrary to science what can remain in it except the central fact that man is but a speck in the Universe, that obviously there are forces far beyond the control of men which guide his destiny that there are certain basic questions which arise in man's mind which nobody can

answer ? However spectacular the progress of science may seem to be it should be obvious to every thinking man that human knowledge has its limitations and that the sphere of the unknown appears to have no limitations at all. The attitude of all right thinking men on life is coloured by this realisation. It is here that philosophy and religion meet; and rational men begin to have a vision and a correct perspective from which to look at the affairs of this mundane world. What is called the Divine Vision in the eleventh Canto of the Bhagavat Geeta appears to be nothing else than this vision which involves the viewing of things not from an anthropocentric but from a cosmocentric point of view. It is here that all religions have some thing in common. But it is emphatically not true—as Dr. Ambedkar points out—that all religions, meaning thereby dogmatic religions, are true.

But religion, to have any relevancy to the welfare of men must have at its core right action. The test is what mental or moral relief does it bring to the suppressed and the down trodden. In the Mahamangala Sutra it is this that is emphasised.

“ Much insight and much education,
Self-control and a well-trained mind,
Pleasant words that are well spoken;
This is the greatest blessing.”

“ To bestow alms and live righteously,
To give help to one's kindred,
To do deeds which can not be blamed;
This is the greatest blessing.”

The end of both law and religion in practical life is the same, viz : human welfare. But as Dr. Ambedkar rightly points out, the law with all its external sanctions can at best control only the minorities. The majority in society could be controlled only from within.

“In all societies”, says Dr. Ambedkar, “law plays a very small part. It is intended to keep the minority within the range of social discipline. The majority is left to sustain its social life by the postulates and sanction of morality. Religion in the sense of morality, must therefore remain the governing principle in every society.”

The great religious thinkers saw this and it is noteworthy that in every religion dogmatic or otherwise, there is an emphasis on creating a body of men who by their work and by their personal example would create the right social atmosphere and a correct attitude to life and social matters. For Buddhism it be the Sangha, for Hinduism it the Order of the Parivrajaka or the Sanyasin.

It is true that in modern society the sphere of the law has swollen beyond all proportion; and that it has invaded areas which in olden days were left to the influences of religion. This is natural because there is obviously a world of difference between human society as it existed in the past and the modern human society with all its enormity and complexity. The nations of the world have already come closer together with the shrinkage of distance because of modern means of transport and communications. The law has already transcended its old dimensions and has consequently forged beyond the sphere of knowledgeability. But curiously enough just because it has ceased to be capable of being known by the ordinary citizen it is likely in future to cease to be a living force in modern society. In ultimate analysis men will have to go and be guided by their instinctive inclinations rather than by external rules of behaviour. Human progress then must ultimately depend upon the way these inclinations and instincts are moulded by education. What was done for the majority of men in the old days by religion will now have to be done by the education of the human mind and intellect in the right manner. We have again to return to the concept of self education or the training of our instincts and emotions at a higher level and in a new form.

If modern society suffers from any failure today it is this that it has not been able to create a body of intellectuals who by their thoughts and personal behaviour would prove to be a beacon light to the majority of men. It is unfortunate that the ordinary intellectual today is after the pursuit of money. He has become a votary of the mamon. He has become completely egocentric forgetting that all that he earns is only a benefit bestowed upon him by the working of the society in which he lives and that he must follow the rule (in a truly modern sense) that we must give unto Ceaser what belongs to Ceaser. Money is the product of economic relationship between men in society and has no real existence in Nature apart from the working of these social relationships. Dr. Ambedkar rightly pointed out in a different context that " Ownership of property is one of the greatest obstacles in free thinking " or as the Upaniṣads say

Hiraṇmayena Pātreṇa Satyasyāpihitam Mukham

" The face of truth is hidden by the golden vessel. "

In these circumstances is it strange that Dr. Ambedkar should have thought that a change over to Buddhism and the creation of a modern Sangha on Buddhistic lines might solve the crucial problem of the Scheduled Castes ? We as intellectuals might think that mere religious formalities of conversion will not satisfy a modern mind, that the roots of moral behaviour in society lie much deeper in human psychology and that outward forms are irrelevant to it. But speaking about the generality of men it may still prove to be a potent psychological influence for their progress and that outward forms may after all mould the inner soul and lead to social happiness which is the ultimate end of both law and religion.

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