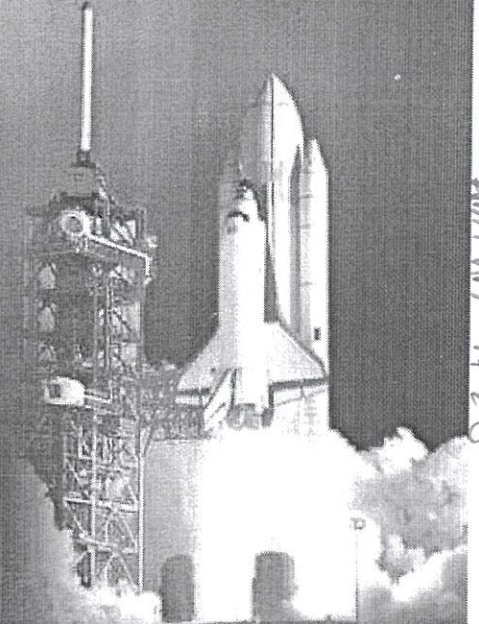
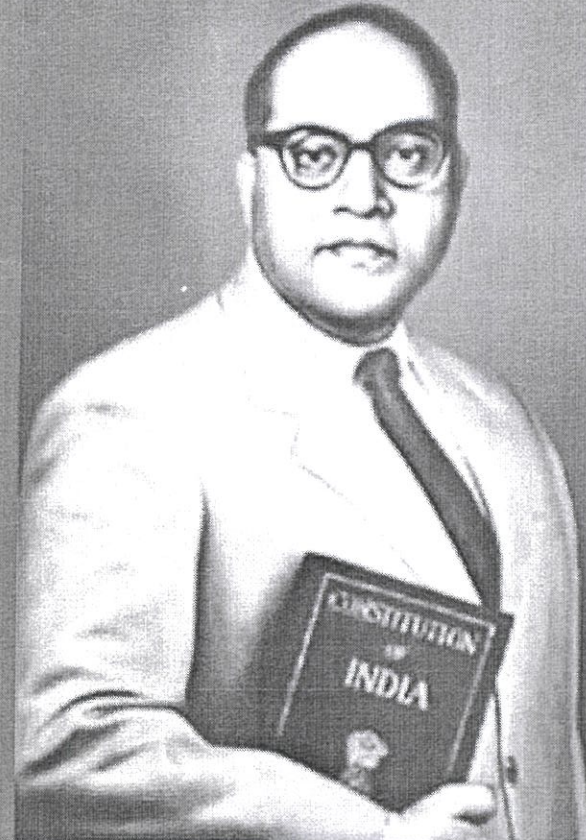


ISSN : 2349-638X
Impact Factor : 6.293

डॉ. बाबासाहेब आंबेडकर आणि एकविसावे शतक

: संपादक :
डॉ. लहू वाघमारे



Ramkrishna Jadhav College,
Ghatkopar (W),
Mumbai - 400086.

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SPECIAL ISSUE No. 75, Vol. I
SPECIAL ISSUE PUBLISHED BY
AAYUSHI INTERNATIONAL INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH JOURNAL
Peer Review & Indexed Journal ISSN 2349-638X Impact factor 6.293
E-mail ID : aiiipramod@gmail.com
www.aiirjournal.com
Mob. 8999250451

AMH 19-20

Impact Factor - 6.293

ISSN-2349-638x



Aayushi International Interdisciplinary Research Journal (AIIRJ)

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PEER REVIEWED & INDEXED JOURNAL


Principal
Niranjan Jhunjhunwala College,
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Special Issue No.75

डॉ. बाबासाहेब आंबेडकर आणि एकविसावे शतक

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Aayushi International Interdisciplinary Research Journal

ISSN 2349-638x

Special Issue No.75

Chief Editor : Pramod P. Tandale

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Ambedkar, Gramsci and Neo-Buddhism: A Philosophical Introspection**Dr. Amita Valmiki**

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“Religion must mainly be a matter of principles only. It cannot be a matter of rules. The moment it degenerates into rules, it ceases to be a religion, as it kills responsibility which is an essence of the true religious act.” – Dr. B. R. Ambedkar¹

“It is urgent that we return to Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar’s thoughts on religion today. He helps us in our immediate fight against a resurgent Hindutva that targets Dalits, Muslims and dissenters in general. More generally, he helps us develop both a critique and an understanding of religion as a phenomenon.” – Prathama Banerjee²

“The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in the interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.” – Antonio Gramsci³

- Educate yourselves because we’ll need all your intelligence. Rouse yourselves because we need all your enthusiasm. Organise yourselves because we need all your strength.
- Educate yourselves because we’ll need all your intelligence. Rouse yourselves because we need all your enthusiasm. Organise yourselves because we need all your strength.

At the outset, the question that crops up is – was Ambedkar totally anti-religion or atheist or non-believer? The question is intriguing and discloses the layers of Ambedkar’s thoughts on religion per se; and that is the requirement of the time. The above quotes reveals Ambedkar’s take on orthodox religion that is inclined towards superstition and blind faith.

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956), the first Law Minister, Chairman of the Constitution of Drafting Committee and architect of the Constitution of Independent India, was an eloquent speaker with his vibrant thoughts on social, political and economic ideology; especially on religion [that imbibed ‘caste system’ in Indian context] fought for the rights of the oppressed community, the dalits. Ambedkar had potent and intense views on religion, specifically Brahmanical Hinduism. He could never affiliate himself with the religion of the popular masses of India as it backed and sustained the fraudulent and treacherous caste system, called as varna system in pliable and tolerable terminology.

Though Ambedkar remained Hindu larger part of his life, he could never associate himself with Hinduism. Therefore religion was out of his prelude. He kept his secular ideology intact throughout his life and propagated egalitarian and nondiscriminatory approach. This is discernible from his philosophy of maintaining ‘uniform civil code’.

There is a striking similarity between Antonio Francesco Gramsci (1891-1937) who was an Italian Neo-Marxist and Ambedkar’s thoughts when the concept of secularism is discussed. Both came from the oppressed classes, the subalterns and dalits respectively. Therefore the pangs of suppression and atrocities were felt equally. Gramsci was bent toward establishing equality by ‘intellectual and moral reform’ and Ambedkar by ‘social and moral consciousness of society.’⁴ Both were aware of the problems faced by subalterns and dalits and believed that these critical issues are not local and regional, but international in nature. The master-slave issue was and is common everywhere and this inequality in any form has to be erased. Both the stalwarts were inspired by the Marxist ideology and were highly critical about religion, though “considered religion culturally and politically relevant; both assessed the presence of subalterns through social, cultural and historical analysis, and sought to negotiate a rightful place within the state, society and history/historiography for these ‘excluded’ individuals.”⁵

The question is though Ambedkar and Gramsci ‘opposed’ religion, why were they, to certain extent ‘for’ religion. For Ambedkar bringing about social revolution by implementing laws, framing political

strategies and bringing economic reforms would lose its essence and enforcement if not subordinated by a common substratum. What can that common substratum be? According to him, it is 'religion'. Religion is utilized in form of a binding factor and therefore religion plays a pivotal role in social, economic and political life of people in any nation. Therefore religion is essential but it needs to have a scientific and rational basis. So Ambedkar says, "Religion, if it is to survive, it must be in consonance with reason, which is another name for science."⁶ In this matter both Gramsci and Ambedkar emphasized too much on "education". Education is a vital factor to promote rational and dialectic reflection that will reinforce the virtues of equality and justice. But the formal, orthodox and authoritative religion not only lacks this but promotes the orthodoxy further, that too not for some years, but forever. Therefore Gramsci noted in *L'Ordine Nuovo* (1919), "Educate yourselves because we'll need all your intelligence. Rouse yourselves because we need all your enthusiasm. Organize yourselves because we need all your strength."⁷ And Ambedkar said, "Educate, Organize and Agitate!"⁸ [This was said much before by the great educator and revolutionary Mahatma Phule and later Sri Narayan Guru reiterated the same message, "Educate that you may be free and organize that you may be strong."⁹]

Therefore the message from these giants was very clear; one has to elevate oneself by knowledge to overthrow the bigotry and fanatic approach in matter of religion. For Gramsci it was Christian theology [though it was also present in Greek thought from the beginning] where the oppressed who are marginalized have lost their 'inner life'. This 'inner life' was the authority of the nobles, not granted to the marginalized subalterns. Though, Gramsci being the materialist thinker advocated the 'inner life' not in a so called religious authoritative context but any individual is worthy of this spiritual concept that is 'inner life' which the priestly and noble community denied for the subalterns. In similar fashion one finds the same philosophical pattern in Ambedkar's thought process; and for Ambedkar it was Hinduism that upheld the Code of Manu as final, blindly enforcing on the oppressed dalits (called 'untouchables' in those days). Ambedkar from the very beginning was anti Brahmanical or anti Hinduism as the religion promoted varnashrama dharma, making varna system as obligation and duty of the individual to hold on lifelong; the upper caste making the lower castes and dalits suffer. It was nothing but giving full sanction for the upper caste to dominate and discriminate; and the lower caste and dalits it was obligatory on their part to suffer. Ambedkar, like Gramsci could not accept this in any case. In this matter he was opposed to religion; but the religion that he felt was beyond all these orthodoxies and fanaticism was Buddhism. As noted by Anne M. Blackburn, "Ambedkar understood Buddhism, religion, kinship and nationalism as or related set of terms with social and political interpretation, and that Ambedkar drew upon Indian cultural resources as well as 'Orientalist' interpretations of Buddhism in order to create a model for a moral community ideologically co-existent with, although not subordinate to, Brahmanical Hinduism and Indian nationalism."¹⁰

Ambedkar therefore thought in simultaneity with Hinduism (that had corrupted, got contaminated and degraded as the religion, that considered few as rulers, superior and 'high' while others as low, filthy and impure, especially the (ex) untouchables, now the dalits) that Buddhism being oriental in nature that participates in the oriental life style and that upheld equality and compassion that would befit the oppressed dalits. So Ambedkar thought of 'conversion' and conversion would be a rebellious move for the existing Hinduism with its horrifying caste system. By converting into Buddhism was also asking the dalits to renounce their age old slavery and by giving up their Hindu identity they will intimate the world that they give up their caste identity as untouchables or dalits. Ambedkar said in 1935, "Although I am born as a Hindu because I had no control over it. But I will not die as a Hindu because I do have control over it."¹¹ Ambedkar accepted Buddhism as against Hinduism that facilitated caste system; and this social stratification brought the divide among the haves and have-nots. The Semitic or Abrahamic religion was foreign to Indian scenario and, according to Ambedkar, would not feel the throb of Indian life. The religion that can feel the pulsation of Indian life was for him, Buddhism. He sought to have a religion that was oriental at the same time can challenge the orthodoxies of Brahmanical Hinduism. In Indian social, political and economic life Ambedkar felt Buddhism was beseeching religion. Again Buddha himself was coming from a Sakya clan that makes a lot of difference. As mentioned in the book *Politics and Cosmopolitanism in a Global Age*, the Licchavis and the Sakya clan had 'gana sangha' (the Republic) social structure that was not in vertical hierarchy but 'horizontal equality', that believed in dialogue and therefore is 'social democracy'. And when Buddha propounded Buddhism, the religion was not

bent towards rituals nor followed any hierarchy with some kind of chain of command but was socio-ethical in nature.¹²

Unlike Hinduism, the ethical theories of Buddhism did not emphasize on the 'essence'; but the Buddhist theory of Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path accentuated on 'knowledge' and considered 'ignorance' as root cause of all the disorder and malaise in the society. [Though Ambedkar did not accept these theories in his Neo-Buddhism, this is a general analysis to Buddhist ethics.] So Buddhism paved way for the oppressed marginalized and put each and every individual in a horizontal social, economic and political structure; rather than upper and lower or untouchable divide. Now that there are only two options for the dalits, either be in Brahmanical Hinduism with their ruthless and malevolent caste system and go on suffering; or remodel and reorganize the community by converting into Buddhism. Buddhism, according to Ambedkar opened up humane avenues to further the 'just' and 'egalitarian' society. In the book Babasaheb Ambedkar, Kurukundi Rao says, "To Ambedkar, then, religion is a foundation of human life and society. This is because morality, and without moral foundations society cannot survive as a human society. Religion, then, is conceptualized by him as a system of moral values, a system of injunctions and prohibitions designed to promote a harmonious human life.....in which there is equality and brotherhood among members and one which is rationalistic in rejecting superstitions, mysticism, irrationality, blind belief, and of course, God, who symbolized all these rejected elements."¹³Buddhism for Ambedkar was propelled politically, not something that is Holy Scripture based authoritative religion.

Therefore Ambedkar's version of Buddhism was/is called Neo-Buddhism. Neo-Buddhism offered greater respectability to the dalits that was denied to them by Brahmanical Hinduism. Also that Neo-Buddhism was more conforming to Indian oppressed dalits than Communism (that would not bind people together). Neo-Buddhism improved upon the dignity of the dalits by providing them confidence and self esteem. Neo-Buddhism or Navayana is popular as Dalit Buddhist Movement of India. In fact it reinterpreted Buddhism and rejected certain basic theories of Buddhism as monasticism, Four Noble Truths, the theory of karma, rebirth and meditation; and considers Buddhism as a denomination of class struggle and bringing about social-political-economic equality. [Therefore Ambedkar's book *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (posthumously published in 1957) is a text followed by the Neo-Buddhists.]

In conclusion, I would like to quote Ambedkar, "There is no doubt, in my opinion, that unless you can change your social order you can achieve little by way of progress. You cannot mobilize the community either for defence or for offence. You cannot build anything on the foundations of caste. You cannot build up a nation, you cannot build up a morality. Anything that you will build on the foundations of caste will crack and will never be a whole."¹⁴Therefore B. R. Ambedkar and his philosophical ideology is the need of the contemporary times.

Salute to the redeemer of the marginalized oppressed, the great Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar!

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