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

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## ABSTRACT

*There are several myths and misconceptions surrounding Abasaheb Bhim Rao Ambedkar's decision to convert to Buddhism, which often sparks interest. Ambedkar first rejected other religions and embraced Buddhism; however, he studied, reinterpreted, twenty years before his death, he adopted Neo-Buddhism, also known as the Navayana. After more than 20 years of fighting for fundamental human rights inside the Hindu community, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar decided that the only way to secure the freedom of the Dalits was for them to convert from Hinduism to other religions. He contrasted the futures of the four religions—Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, and Krishna in the Mahabodhi Society magazine in Kolkata. In the philosophy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the idea of human dignity—that is, the right to respect based on one's inherent humanity—is emphasized. His commitment has been to the education, employment, and social justice of the Dalits, who have been subjected to discrimination on the basis of their birth status. Ambedkar was dissatisfied with the Hindu caste system, which was founded on hierarchy, and he thought that the only way to offer the Dalits respect was to eradicate caste. However, Ambedkar's goal of eliminating the caste system was not fulfilled because of the resistance of the influential Hindus. Rather than that, he thought about changing the faith in order to save the Dalit people. Ambedkar made a substantial contribution to the dignity and elevation of Untouchables. He created a number of laws and guidelines to protect the Dalits. He urged Hindu castes to treat Dalits equally, asserting that the fight for human dignity will persist until they do so. He maintained that liberty, equality, and fraternity are prerequisites for a happy existence. He regarded rights as both individual and collective rights, not just those found within the strict parameters of liberal individualism.*

**Keywords:** History, Untouchability, Dignity, Freedom.

## I. INTRODUCTION

“Morality is not the foundation of Hinduism as a religion. Rather than being dictated by Hinduism, morality is a distinct force that is upheld by societal needs. Morality is the religion of the Buddha. Religion has it ingrained. It is true that Buddhism denies the existence of God.

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Morality takes the role of God. For Buddhism, morality is what God is to other religions”.

“The point he wants to make clear is that the Buddha taught not just Ahimsa but a lot of other things. He imparted knowledge on social freedom, intellectual freedom, economic freedom, and political freedom as part of his faith. Finding a religious leader who can match the Buddha would be challenging, as his teachings cover a wide range of societal issues, his ideas are thoroughly contemporary, and his primary goal is to save humanity while they are still here on Earth rather than promising redemption in paradise after death.” are the words of Dr. Ambedkar.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the first law minister and chair of the constitution's drafting committee, significantly influenced the legal and political direction of India's 20th-century development. His expertise as a legal scholar and political economist is a testament to his contributions. Ambedkar was a social reformer, founding father, philosopher, economist, women's rights activist, and religious icon. Despite his significant influence, awareness of his story remains largely provincial. Ambedkar instigated the modern anti-caste movement in India and is a well-known advocate for rights. This paper provides biographical details about B.R. Ambedkar's life and his role in Indian society, focusing on his identity and the emergence of Buddhism.

## II. HISTORY

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was born in 1891 in Mhow, Madhya Pradesh, to a Mahār family. His original surname, Ambavadekar, was derived from Ambavade, a hamlet in Western Maharashtra. His father was an officer in the British Indian Army, and the family moved to Mhow. A school teacher mentor changed his surname to avoid shame. The caste of his family, or Mahār, is denoted by the name Mahār. Caste plays a significant role in Hindu social life, possibly more so than religion or national identity.

Caste is a crucial aspect of Indian identity development, and Ambedkar's mobilization efforts in India during the 20th century focused on this aspect. The Maharashtrian Dalit groups, the largest of which were the largest, were assigned various caste obligations, including maintaining the hamlet, removing dead cow carcasses, communicating with neighboring communities, locating thieves, sweeping village roads, fixing structures, and delivering fuel to cemeteries. They also mediated property disputes, guided government employees, and participated in religious rites performed by Brahmins. The existence of Mahārs is considered a distinguishing characteristic of a Maharashtra hamlet.

Ramji Sakpal, the father of Ambedkar, was deeply committed to the bhakti movement, influenced by the 15th-century Indian mystic Kabir. He instilled anti-caste beliefs in his children, encouraging them to recite hymns and devotional melodies. Sakpal also read Marāṭhī

poet-saints and Hindu epics, such as the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa. Ambedkar acknowledged his father's religious beliefs as a factor in his Buddhism choice.

Ramji Sakpal, Ambedkar's father, was deeply devoted to 15th-century Indian mystic Kabir and the bhakti movement. He encouraged his children to recite daily hymns and devotional lyrics to Kabir, imparting his anti-caste ideas. He also read Hindu epics and Marāṭhī poet-saints. Ambedkar's adoption of Buddhism was influenced by his father's religiosity, as he was initially skeptical about the Ramayana and Mahabharata's moral lessons. Ambedkar's preface to *The Buddha and His Dhamma* highlights his father's religious influence.

Ambedkar, the youngest of 14 children, was deeply affected by the story of Karna's death and dismemberment. Kabir, along with Mahatma Phule and the Buddha, was a significant influence on his thought. Ambedkar's mother died when he was six, and his father's sister, Mirabai, took care of the children, especially Bhimrao, the youngest. His parents provided special care for him.

Ambedkar's autobiographical piece, *Waiting for a Visa*, narrates his realization of being untouchable to caste-Hindus. He explains that he was aware of his untouchability due to his school treatment, where he was denied access to water and teachers refused to touch his papers. However, it was only when he went to stay with his father for the summer at nine years old that he truly understood his society's perception of him. His brother, Bhimrao, and two cousins were staying with their aunt in Sātārā, who was unable to care for them due to her old age and disability. He revolves around a group of children who were sent by their father to travel by train. They were excited to embark on their journey, but their letter was not received and they arrived without anyone to meet. The station master, who assumed they were brahmin children, was disgusted and angry upon discovering their untouchability. They eventually convinced a bullock cart driver to let them drive his cart alongside him in exchange for double his usual fair. However, it was revealed that the driver had not been honest about the journey's length and that they were without drinking water. The driver refused to share any water and directed them to dirty standing water by the roadside, which was unfit for animals. That highlights the challenges faced by children on a journey by train and the importance of honesty and understanding in navigating difficult situations. As night fell, the idea of a bullock cart driver taking well-dressed Untouchables to rob and kill them began to haunt them. As they stopped for the night, the young Ambedkar tried to convince a toll collector to share water with them, but the Hindu man refused, implying their need for water was evidence of their untouchability. He denied help, stating that if they weren't untouchable, someone would have given them water already. They were directed to stagnant puddles by the roadside, which smelled of cow urine and excreta.

Ambedkar's account of a horrific incident highlights the horror faced by nine-year-old Ambedkar and his brother and cousins in an unfamiliar place. The grownups are not only unwilling to help but also seem disgusted by them. The children realize they must band together to survive, as they face a real chance of being murdered. They discover that caste-Hindu males take care of the bullocks, pulling carts for food and water.

### **III. NEO-BUDDHISM**

The Ambedkarite Buddhist movement, a sociological and status-seeking movement, initiated by the untouchable, is distinct from other Buddhist movements globally. Ambedkar viewed Buddha's teachings as sociologically significant, criticizing Indian social structure and caste system. Both Buddha and Ambedkar's ideologies differed in their social and religious contexts. Ambedkar Buddhist movement aimed to solve the Indian caste system and leave Hinduism. Converted in Nagpur, he gave followers Dhamma Diksha, containing twenty-two vows, and believed Buddhism wouldn't challenge predominant Hindu beliefs like Islam or Christianity. Buddhism involves daily life practices like karma, rebirth, dharma, meditation, spirituality, politics, individuality, and social action. Neo-Buddhist practices differ from Dalit Buddhists, who pray to all gods, and Neo-Buddhists prioritize identity transformation over religious conversion, focusing on monks' speeches and chants. The Dalit Buddhist movement is influential in India and globally, with support from the Western Buddhist Order and Japanese leaders. They built monasteries and campaigns to free Mahabodhi Temple from Hindu control. Ambedkar's teachings, including the Five Precepts and Ten Parramattas, continue to influence Indian society, but he prioritizes nirvana over traditional teachings to remove injustice and inhumanity.

#### **(A) Caste:**

Ambedkar's understanding of caste and the caste system evolved over time. He initially identified caste characteristics as endogamy and exogamy, leading to evils like sati, child-marriage, and widow remarriage. Once a caste closed its boundaries, other castes followed, with Brahmins closing first. Ambedkar emphasized endogamous characteristics, division of roped, absence of inter-dining, and birth. He argued that caste name is important for continued reproduction and castes must be distinguished from the caste system based on graded inequality. Ambedkar emphasized the importance of caste in Hinduism, arguing that breaking caste codes violates deeply held beliefs. He proposed annihilating caste without community bonds, suggesting inter-caste marriages and dining. He also argued against shastras defending varnashramadharma, which justify graded organization of society and justify graded

organization of society.

**(B) Untouchability:**

Ambedkar made a distinction between the caste and untouchability systems, despite the fact that both share the same system of graduated inequity. The system that kept the untouchable outside the fold and rendered all social engagement with him filthy and horrible meant that untouchability was not only an extreme type of caste degradation but something entirely distinct. Despite their disparities and cleavages, he contended, all untouchables suffer from the same disadvantages and receive the same treatment from Hindu castes: they are banished to the outside of villages, are hated by everyone, and are kept apart from human contact. He offered a very creative thesis that untouchables were broken men living on the outskirts of village communities who, because they refused to give up Buddhism and beef-eating, came to be condemned as untouchables, even though he did not thoroughly investigate the reasons for the origin of untouchability in one instance. Ambedkar believed that there was no simple answer to the problem because of the deeply ingrained customs and beliefs surrounding untouchability in India. In order to eradicate untouchability, society as a whole must change, making respect for others' rights a manner of life rather than only a legal need. It was too much to anticipate from established groups given the deeply ingrained biases and interests surrounding the institution of untouchability. As a result, he believed that the untouchables had the main responsibility for emancipating themselves. Such self-help needs organization and knowledge in addition to challenges. In such an endeavor, advancing a constitutional democracy with preferences at several levels can be quite beneficial.

**(C) Human Dignity:**

Ambedkar, a prominent Indian theoretician, believed that a state should prioritize the disadvantaged if it is committed to upholding rights. He developed a complex set of criteria to determine disadvantages, focusing on socially engendered disadvantages rather than natural and hereditary ones. Ambedkar believed that dominant social relations often perpetuated disadvantages, ignoring them and absolving society of responsibility. He left behind a system of safeguards for the disadvantaged, particularly untouchables, and believed that positive measures were a better guarantee than societal moral conscience. Although moral conscience is a prerequisite, it is not sufficient to sustain such measures in the long run.

The types of safeguards for disadvantaged groups, but they were not considered appropriate for all groups. They emphasized the need for autonomous political representation to ensure their development, preservation, or reproduction. They envisioned definitive constitutional measures

to address larger issues and specific demands. They also sought reservation for disadvantaged groups in public employment, arguing that they would be marginalized without legal support. They also sought extensive supportive policy measures to extend the benefits of developmental and welfare measures to these groups, ensuring they are not marginalized. The speaker believed that the appropriateness of these measures depends on the specific conditions of the group.

Ambedkar emphasized the importance of inclusive rights in preferential measures, rather than just the majority's goodwill. Goodwill needs to be cultivated with awareness of rights, as without it, goodwill and benevolence can collapse into narrow pursuit of interests disguised as altruism.

#### **IV. CONVENTION OF RELIGION**

Ambedkar's dream of annihilating the caste was hindered by the strong opposition of the Hindus. He chose Buddhism as a viable solution to rescue the Dalit community, embracing it on October 14, 1956, in Nagpur, Maharashtra. This was the largest conversion in a single day in the world, with around 8,000 lakh supporters adopting Buddhism. Most of them gave up meat eating, degrading occupations, and worshipping Hindu household gods and goddesses. Ambedkar's revolution was a counter revolution, aiming to establish an alternative society to Hindu society, which was based on inequality and held downtrodden communities in mental slavery. The Dalit community did not develop, instead languishing in a state made by high-caste Brahmins. The act of embracing Buddhism was spontaneous and understandable, but they had no idea what it meant to be a true Buddhist. In 1956, Ambedkar gave a talk titled "Why I like Buddhism and how it is useful to the world in its present circumstances" on the British Broadcasting Corporation. He argued that Buddhism teaches prajna (understanding against superstition and supernaturalism), karuna (love), and samata (equality), which are essential for a good and happy life. He also criticized Hinduism for believing in God and soul, stating that Buddhism has no such belief. He also criticized the caste system and Chaturvarnya, which Hinduism believes in.

##### **(A) Contribution By Ambedkar:**

Ambedkar's significant contribution to the upliftment and dignity of the Dalit community is remarkable. He was the only person to attempt to eliminate the hierarchy-based caste system and the injustices faced by the Dalits. Ambedkar suffered due to the rise of ideas of high and low in Hindu society. He later became the first Law Minister in free India, and his credit goes to creating the necessary atmosphere to eliminate 'Untouchability'. His efforts were a testament to the power of Ambedkar in eradicating injustice and promoting dignity. Ambedkar argued

that Hindus should be allowed to touch Christians and Muslims, and should not be allowed to touch Hindus who worship Hindu Gods. He called for punishment for those who practice and support 'Untouchability'. Some argue that these people are not yet fit for equality, while Hindus desire independence and democracy. Ambedkar argued that a people with temples upon their liberties cannot aspire to democracy. In 1927, a conference was held to discuss this issue. The Hindu Dharma aimed to eliminate caste differences and allow all castes to work as priests in temples. The Chowdar Tank dispute led to the court ruling that tanks were public property. Ambedkar aimed to find justice for the 'Untouchables' who had been subjected to humiliation for centuries. He suggested that no section of Hindus should be excluded from temples, more representatives should be elected by the people, and the government should employ them in the army and police department.

The British Government invited Indian leaders to discuss India's problems at the Round Table Conference in London. Gandhiji also participated, and Ambedkar spoke angrily against the British government, claiming that backward sections did not enjoy equality with other sections. Ambedkar supported Gandhiji's views on justice for the 'Untouchables' and secured separate electorates for the Harijans at the Second Round Table Conference in 1931. However, Gandhiji could not agree with Ambedkar's views.

#### **(B) Freedom:**

Ambedkar's work primarily focused on constitutional democracy, emphasizing the rule of law as a bond that unites people and ensures equal participation in collective affairs. He was sensitive to the relationship between law and customs and popular beliefs, recognizing that customs may defend parochial interests and popular beliefs may be influenced by prejudices and not uphold fairness. Ambedkar believed that if law upholds freedom and democracy, it could be placed at the service of the common good. He believed that the role of the state based on law and democratic mandate is crucial, and he envisioned a democracy informed by law and characterized by sensitivity to democracy.

Ambedkar emphasized the importance of democracy and law, emphasizing the state's autonomy and transcending societal parochial interests. He argued that permanent ascriptive majorities, which are not subject to political dissolution or reconstitution, can undermine rights while pretending to uphold constitutional democracy. He emphasized the need for the state to transcend these interests.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

It demonstrates that Ambedkar did all in his power to save the Dalits from the grasp of the



powerful Hindus and to provide the Dalit people dignity. In order to protect the Dalits, he created a number of laws and guidelines. Additionally, Buddha created a path to Buddhism, where caste, discrimination, and social hierarchy are nonexistent, for the Dalits. Each and every individual has dignity and self-respect. The status of men and women is equal. The fight for human dignity would go on unless and until the powerful Hindu castes are prepared to accept the Dalits into their fold and treat them equally, he posed a challenge to the higher caste Hindus. Ambedkar's religious stance was ambivalent, despite not believing in a personal God or revelation. He believed religion serves as a moral foundation for societies, promoting altruism, solidarity, and preventing exploitation, injustice, and wrongdoing. He viewed religion as a means to achieve a good life.

He emphasized the importance of freedom, equality, and fraternity for a good life, and advocated for a system of discrete rights that encompassed both individual and group rights. He defended both types of rights in Constituent Assembly debates and argued for civil, political, social, and economic rights, arguing that conflicts should be resolved through civic and political forums. He also supported the rights of minorities and cultural groups, advocating for their rights to maintain their identities and participate in public affairs.

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