

AMBEDKAR'S THE BUDDHA AND HIS DHARMA: AN ANALYSIS FROM ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar happens to be one the original thinkers of modern India. He consistently tried to use his intellect for the betterment of humanity in general and marginalised sections in particular. His contribution to religious thought, particularly to Buddhism has been recognised as one of the seminal intellectual contributions that were being made by him. This paper focusing on the engagement of Ambedkar with Buddhism proposes that the Navayana Buddhism has fascinating dimension of ecological ethics which proposes the concept of inclusive development of human society within the framework of sustainable development.

KEY-WORDS: *Navayana, Buddha, Ambedkar, Environmentalism, Caste, Water, Untouchables, Sustainable Development*

INTRODUCTION

The text the Buddha and his Dharma offer an exciting picture on the relations between human beings and natural world. This is an important source that shows the sensitivity and engagement of Ambedkar with sustainable progress of human society wherein ecological conservation happens to be one of the important factors. He reflects upon the importance of conserving natural world for the holistic development of human society by invoking ideas and practices of the Buddha.

This paper has been organised into three broad sections: the first section documents the ecological sensitivity of Ambedkar by focusing on his ideas and activities: the second section focus on the engagement of Ambedkar with Buddhism as ethical value system from the perspective of ecology and the final section illustrates the relevance of Buddhist ideas of Ambedkar from ecological perspective to the contemporary times.

1. AMBEDKAR AND GREEN DISCOURSE

Undoubtedly the ideas of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar ((1891-1956) shows an insightful perception on human ecology. The ecological dimension of ideas and activities of Ambedkar is in fact capable of creating a new ecological discourse which I term as inclusive environmentalism which refers to the process of capturing the ecological voices of marginalised sections of India. The ideas and practices of Ambedkar from the perspective of ecology can be captured from the prism of intellectual environmental history which concentrates on the contribution of philosophers, poets, politicians and activists for ecological thought (McNeil, 2003, Wroster, 1977). This paper attempts to navigate into the intellectual universe of Ambedkar and traces the ecological dimension of his thought.

Indian environmentalism or ecological thought mainly dominated by either left wing notion of environmentalism of the poor and right wing perception of cultural ecological nationalism (Guha, and Alier, 1998). These two environmentalisms did not give adequate space to the role of social exclusion in alienating marginalised section from the access to ecologically important resources. In this context it would be useful to invoke ideas of Ambedkar to conceptualise the concerns of Dalits in the environmental thought of India.

The writings and activities of Ambedkar mainly operated with the mission of emancipation of Dalits from oppressive conditions. In his mission he did not give prime importance to the relationship between Dalits and natural world. However he does possess an implicit vision on the relationship between ecology and Dalits. Some studies did try to underscore the ecological dimension of Ambedkar ideas. It has been proposed that economic ideas of Ambedkar embedded a fascinating ecological dimension rooted from the concept of public waalfarism by using ecological goods (Abraham, 2002, Thorat, 2006). Another set of studies proposes that Ambedkar attempts to use human rights approach to conceptualise ecologically important resources. He believed in the fact that ecological resources need to be shared by the population of a nation rather than allowing a section of population to monopolise the resources (Teltumeda, 2016). The other set of writings in the connection between Ambedkar and ecology is that his ability to connect with caste based exclusion to economic and ecologically important resources (Sharma, 2012). In all these approaches, a thing which has not been explicitly brought out is that ecological values or ethics that Ambedkar attempted to create for the sustainable relationship between human beings and nature. This paper proposes that the text *Buddha and his Dharma* of Ambedkar reflect the bio-ethics and ecological ethics offered by Ambedkar.

II. AMBEDKAR AND HIS ECOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENT

Before I begun to locate *Buddha and his Dharma*, it would be apt to treat the ecological sensitivity of Ambedkar. His writings had several stray references on the role of caste based discrimination in conditioning the access of individual to natural and ecological goods. He consistently engaged with the issue of exclusion of Dalits from accessing natural resources. He mentions an instance where a Chamar (person belongs to untouchable castes of North India) was severely beaten for drawing water from village well. The justification for this punishment was the Chamar touch has polluted water. He mentions this incident to show that how inhuman caste Hindus are. A Dalit was assaulted by caste Hindus when he attempted to save the life of a young woman who fell in a well. The point Ambedkar consistently argued is that Dalits need to be treated as separate social segment consistently crippled by treatment of caste Hindu society. This marginalisation of Dalits for him is a structural process which

could be seen in all walks of life including alienation from access to natural and ecological resources. Untouchability for Ambedkar is one of the visible and strong mechanisms to exclude Dalit from access to public goods. The deterministic character of caste in accessing common pool and public resources explicitly brought out by Ambedkar in the following expression: ‘In use of public facilities, the spirit of discrimination manifests itself in the exclusion of untouchables from school, wells, temples and means of conveyance’ (Ambedkar, 1989:108).

Ambedkar championed the concept of environmentalism for the poor. The Mahad Satyagraha was a historic movement in which two issues are highlighted by the activism of Ambedkar: he attempted to dismantle the very root of Hindu belief system i.e., burning the Manusmriti and fight against water Untouchability (Zelliot 2005). Here Ambedkar advised his followers to violate the age old restrictions on accessing drinking from common pool resources which is a vital common pool resource (Rao, 2009). The Mahad Satyagraha took place in the small town in Maharashtra in 1927. Ambedkar along with three thousand followers violated the traditional restrictions of preventing untouchables from accessing water. Ambedkar took water into his hands from the Chowdar Tank and violated water the age old Untouchability. While most of the studies on the Mahad Satyagraha treats the incident as crusade against caste oppression. It is in fact true, but this incident has historical significance as one of pioneering attempt for environmentalism for the poor. It is interesting to see the reflection of Ambedkar on this occasion: ‘At the outset, let me tell those who oppose us that we did not perish because we would not drink water from this Chowdar Tank. We now want to go to the Tank only to prove that, like others, we are also human beings’ (Jafflot, 2005). The episode of the Mahad Satyagraha demonstrates the complexity of competing interests of Indian society over access to resources and attempt of marginalised sections of Indian society to fight for justice in the domain of environment.

III. EGALITARIAN ENVIRONMENTALISM AND AMBEDKAR

Environmental historians in India mainly focused on preservationist ideas derived mainly from the texts of Brahmanical literature. The main objective of this framework is to provide conceptual justification for Hindu culture as intrinsically eco-sensitive. In this process the ecological dimension of non-Hindu religion received a less attention in the studies on ecological thought of India. It is in this domain that Ambedkar has significant body of ideas to offer to Indian environmentalism. By invoking ideas of the Buddha Ambedkar constructs the concept of egalitarian environmentalism which reminds us the need for adopting not only an organic relationship with nature but also responsive attitude towards protecting the natural world in which we are all dependent upon for survival. Ambedkar does not confine to sympathy for nature, but urge for the attitude of ‘nature for all and all for nature’. It means that resources of nature are not meant for few rather for all. And all human beings possess equal right to use the resources of nature in an ethical and sustainable way.

The monumental text *Buddha and his Dharma* starts with an analysis on the process of transformation of Siddhartha Gautama as the Buddha. For Ambedkar it happened in the context of Gautama’s attempt to find a solution to water disputes between the Sakhyas and the Koloyas the tribal confederation of ancient India. The decision of the Sakhyas to undertake war against enemies was bitterly opposed by Siddhartha who attempted to convince his kinsmen to move away from the path of war. As he failed in his objective he has eventually chosen the path of self-exile. The point to be noted here is that the character of the Buddha for Ambedkar emerges from eco-sensitive resources such as water (Ambedkar, 2006: 28-29). Engagement of Ambedkar for ecological justice

with the character of the Buddha could be seen at three levels: the conception of evolution of nature: the relationship between human beings and other living forms and finally the ethical aspects of human ecology.

AMBEDKAR, NATURE AND THE BUDDHA

Firstly, Ambedkar skilfully engaged in analysing the origin of evolution in the Buddhist cosmology. While analysing the process of genesis of the world in the philosophical tradition of Indian thought, he put forward the Buddha's version of nature. For Ambedkar biotic world does not have superior and inferior rather 'all individual things are analogues one to another and therefore, no one can be regarded as the final sources to other'. This means all living forms in the world mutually depended upon each other for survival. This concept is closely linked with eco-biological concept of food chain. This concept also reflects the social philosophy of Ambedkar i.e., importance of all social class to the broader social system. This idea is foundation for interconnectedness of natures and its form at three levels: firstly, the connection between biotic and abiotic factors, secondly, connection between living organisms and finally interaction between human beings and nature. The ecological values that Ambedkar tried to offer is to highlights the web of interconnectedness of living organisms with non living nature. He takes this proposition to next level by underscoring the question of how such nitation between human beings and rest of nature should be from the perspective of Buddhism.

Secondly an interesting aspect of neo-Buddhism (Ambedkar version of Buddhism) address is that the relationship among human beings and between living forms and human beings. The main crux of Buddhist Dharma according to Ambedkar is engagement of 'man and the relation of man to man in his life on earth' (Ambedkar, 2006: 121). By invoking Buddhist Dharma, Ambedkar was addressing two things: reflection on the iniquitous social order wherein powerful sections exploit nature for selfish class and caste interests and secondly, visualising his dream society i.e., society free from exploitation and deprivation. Neo-Buddhism does not satisfy with harmonious relationship between human beings and it also proposes organic relationship with all living forms. Ambedkar invoked Buddha to reflect upon this aspect which is as follows: 'Love is not enough; what is required is Maître. It is wider than love. It means fellowship not merely with human beings but with all living beings. Is not such Maitri necessary? What else can give to all living beings the same happiness which one seeks for one's own self, to keep the mind impartial, open to all, with affection for everyone and hatred for none' (Ambedkar, 2006:129).

According to Ambedkar love compassion towards living forms is an essential feature of Buddhism and it is one of the important ecological virtues that it had given to the world. Here Ambedkar proposes a reflexive moral code for human beings while engaging with other species. It obviously shows the fact that he was not only satisfied with anthropocentric conception of the world rather prefers inclusive bio-ecological centric world wherein all species have equal rights for their existence.

For Ambedkar the essence of true Indian civilisation and values lies in Buddhist tradition. For him Brahmanism is an anti-thesis to humanistic values and nature's biological ethics. He upholds the suggestions of the Buddha on conservation of animals and all life forms from destruction. While invoking the ideas of the Buddha, Ambedkar condemned the killing animals in the following passage 'that sacrifice neither were nay oxen slain, neither goats, nor fowls, nor fatted pigs, nor were any kinds of living creatures put to death. No trees were cut down to be used as posts, no Dabbha grasses mown to strew around the sacrificial spot' (Ambedkar, 2006:

267). This bitter critique on nature's exploitation was launched by the Buddha against Brahmanism more than thousand years back and it was called back by Ambedkar with his interpretation of Buddhism.

Third important feature of neo-Buddhism is its apparent eco-sensitivity and eco-gospel based upon ethical and moral treatment of all living forms. In the perception of the Buddha a king, a rich man and popular persons are not great men. A great man according to him is 'a man given to the welfare of many of many folks, to the happiness of many folk' (Ambedkar, 2006: 293). According to Ambedkar the essence of man in Buddhist thought is the one who lives for welfare of others. This ethical dogma reflected in the discourse of Buddhist ecology. Ambedkar explicitly brought out the views of the Buddha on caste system. He quotes the following words the Buddha on the notion of outcaste: 'whosoever in this world harms living beings once-born or twice-born, in whom there is no compassion for living beings is an outcast' (Ambedkar, 2006: 307). Ambedkar invoked Buddha to counter Brahmanical notion caste system and outcast for him should not be determined by birth rather by qualities of person. Thus, Ambedkar marshalled the ideas of Buddha and evolve a powerful critique on not only iniquitous social order but also eco-sensitive ideas which capable of bringing eco-sensitivity in society.

CONCLUSION

Ecology has emerged as an important phenomenon in the academic and public discourse. It is indeed necessary to expand its scope by invoking new ideas to find solutions to emerging ecological crisis. The ideas of Ambedkar offer a fresh dimension to Indian environmentalism. His ideas show that environment needs to be located in the dynamics of social forces that determines the nature of human relationship with environment. The ideas of Ambedkar strongly remind us that environmental governance should be crafted based upon the principle of equity and bio-ethical spirits to cater to the needs of all sections of human society. In a way the Ambedkar ideas enables us to focus on ecological democracy and inclusive environmentalism which means environment for all. Particularly his engagement with Buddhism preaches bio-centric approach to look at social process. This means all species including human beings have equal rights over the fight of nature and at the same time all human beings has responsibility to participate in conservation of environment. In nutshell the eco-philosophy of Ambedkar can be termed as 'environment for all and all for environment'. This paper argues the concept of egalitarian environmentalism of Ambedkar has global and local relevance. However, his contribution to ecology needs to be further seriously investigated to cement his place as an ecological thinker.

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