

# CHAPTER - I

## Introduction

Ambedkar's socio-religious philosophy aimed at achieving basic human rights for the Depressed Classes of India; and in doing so in the long run he was not only inspired with the egalitarian philosophy of Buddhism but also adopted the religion of *Sakyamuni* along with thousands of his associates. The long struggle of Ambedkar for the establishment of equality, liberty and fraternity in Indian society proved to be a turning point in the history of modernisation in India. Article I of the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" adopted and proclaimed by the General Assembly resolution 217A(III) of 10<sup>th</sup> December, 1948, says, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."<sup>1</sup> The concept of "Human Rights" was 'logos incognita' in Indian ethos and Hindu social culture inspite of the discourses of the high profile philosophy of the *Upanishad*. Arther Schopenhauer, Max-Muller, Winternitz, Jacobi, Ludwig, Otto de Fries, Sir John woodroff to mention a few of the host of India lover indologists were, of course, enamoured of the *Upanishad*, their faces turned pale and grim at the sight of the caste system that deliberately on some improvised definition of purity and impurity of profession divided the Hindu society into four unbridgeable islands namely *Brahman*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra*. These four castes were further divided into numbers of subcastes and outcastes. *Vasistha Samhita*, *Manusmriti*, *Yajnavalkasmriti*, and *Naradasmriti* etc. amongst other *Samhitas* not only deprived the majority of the Indian population stamping them as low-castes but also stripped the female-world of legitimate and common sense human rights.

In ancient India the caste hierarchy—the *varna-jati* system had been a peculiar phenomenon where the high 'Varna' or caste could systematically exploit the low-castes. Right to education, religious officiation, the power of owning land, the right of access to the scriptures,

holding the power of administration, legislation and justice and the right to military training and carrying ornaments were only the privilege of the high caste ; the lower castes and *jatis* were deprived of all these rights and powers. The low castes had only the responsibility of tilling land, producing grains in the field, providing food to the high castes and doing all the menial works of industry and commerce. In India the power of making laws for the state and society was in the hands of the Brahmins , and even the Kings were not entrusted with the right to legislation for the people of their kingdoms; they had to abide by the *Dharmasastras* as inlaid by the Brahmins and certainly the laws were always in favour of the high castes in general and the Brahmins in particular. The kings could not change the laws. "According to *Rajadharma* the king was given the power to enforce the law. *Dharmasastras* did not confer or recognise any legislative power in the king....Under the kingship as recognised and established under the *Dharmasastras* the laws were those laid down by the *Dharmasastras* themselves. They did not authorise the king to lay down new laws or amend the provisions of *Dharmasastras*. On the other hand *Dharmasastras* also laid down the laws governing the conduct of the king himself."<sup>2</sup>

Long had gone by the early *Brahmanical* predominance in polity and society and there came the Islamic rule in the medieval period to be replaced by the colonial administration of the British to be followed by a democratic Government of independent India, theoretically a Government of the people, for the people and by the people . All through the political changes of the ages gone by what did not change noticeably was the caste system and inter-caste hatred. During the Sultani period the activities of the protagonists of the *Bhakti* movement failed to produce lasting affect on the caste-ridden Hindu society. In the British period the ideas of Raja Rammohan Roy, Dayananda Saraswati and Vivekananda did not touch the lives of the downtrodden and the Untouchable at all to the degree of changing their socio-economic condition and socio-political status. The task of arousing the Depressed Classes to the effect of asserting their rights in society remained to be done only by their own leaders. True to this expectation there emerged leaders of the Depressed Classes and following the foot-steps of Jotiba Phooley, Periyar Ramaswami Naiker, Narayan Guru etc., there came up Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar.

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was unique in his socio-religious philosophy, in creativity and

criticism. Hindu society and religion came within the purview of his criticism. In fact Hindu society, as it exists today, has been more or less the same since the arrival of the *Manusmriti* which most probably was written in the period between the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century B.C. and 2<sup>nd</sup> Century A.D. In the post-Mauryan period along with the revival of Brahminism following the anti-Buddhist activity of Pushyamitra Sunga, social stratification on the basis of the four castes became rigorous. The *Manusmriti* was written in the name of Manu but his original name was Sumati Bhargav. Most probably, Pushyamitra Sunga patronised the writings of the *Manusmriti* which embodied the Brahminical system of social order, and it set the social tradition of the Hindus. The Manu carries on the tradition of the *Sutra* literature, specially the *Apastamba Sutra*. In this *Sutra* the inter-relationship of four castes is stated thus: "Among these *varnas* (*Brahmans*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas* and the *Shudras*) the preceding one is superior by birth to that which follow it" (*Apastamba* 1.1.1.4-5).<sup>3</sup>

It may be noted that the *Manusmriti* went a step further in degrading the women folk along with the *Shudras*. Ambedkar has given reasons for this. According to him the women folk presented 50% of the population and if the *Shudras* were added to the number, they would have formed 70% of the population at least. It was the fear of the majority domination by the *Shudras* and the women that influenced the decision to degrade these two categories of people. Besides, there were others namely the *Atishudras* forming the Untouchables of the society.

The *Manusmriti* has accorded inferior status to all castes other than the Brahmins. It is stated in the *Manusmriti* that the Brahmins are the Gods on earth (*Bhudev*). It is because of the excellence of their birth, they are entitled to all the wealth of the earth.<sup>4</sup> As regards the others, they are to eat the remains of the food left by the Brahmins and to wear the cloths worn by the Brahmins and left off. The whole philosophy of the Brahmins has been to dominate over the other castes and enjoy the life and property without intrusion by the other castes. To keep down the rebellion by the other castes the Brahminical system has introduced what has been called "the graded inequality" by Ambedkar at the time of winding the debate on the constitution of India in the Constituent Assembly on 25th of November, 1949.

Ambedkar has indicated in the constitution that it would give the citizens of India Justice, 'Liberty', 'Equality' and 'Fraternity'. The preamble to the constitution incorporates these principles thus :

“ Justice, Social ,economic and political ;

Liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship;

Equality of status and of opportunity ; and to promote among them all

Fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation.”

Ambedkar explained before the Constituent Assembly that the caste system is anti-national since it breeds jealousy and hatred . The minimum sense of fraternity is wanting because of inter-caste hatred and exclusiveness mainly propagated and practised by the Brahmins.

The Hindu caste system is the most significant example of Hindu socio-religious hierarchy . The Indian Statutory Commission 1930 (Cmd.3568).Vol.I.,Cap.IV.stated in its Report, that “Every Hindu necessarily belongs to the caste of his parents and in that caste he inevitably remains . No accumulation of wealth and no exercise of talents can alter his caste status; and marriage outside his caste is prohibited or severely discouraged .”<sup>5</sup> Caste signifies the enhancement and transformation of social distance into a religious or a magical principle . In the Hindu system, the religious doctrine permits caste mobility for the individual, in a re-incarnated life only .

It may be noted in this connection that “caste” and “class” are different. A “class” may mean any category or type within which individuals or units fall . We may speak , for example, of novel readers or social reformers as constituting a “class”. Here we do not deal with a group in the sociological sense. However we may think of artists, physicians, engineers and mechanics as classes . But these are occupational categories . The various occupations make up *vertical* division of the community, whereas the divisions that reflect the principle of social class are the *horizontal* strata, always a graded order. Wherever social intercourse is limited by considerations of status, by distinctions between “higher”and “lower” there social class exists. In this context a social class is any portion of community marked off from the rest by social status. A

system or structure of social classes involve, first , a hierarchy of status groups, second, the recognition of the superior-inferior stratification and finally some degree of permanency of the structure.<sup>6</sup>

The Hindu caste system is basically a fixed order of occupations. Thus Manu describes the man's creation: " But for the sake of the prosperity of the world , he caused the *Brahman*, the *Kshatriya*, the *Vaishya* and the *Shudra* to proceed from his mouth, arms, his thighs and his feet...But in order to protect this universe he ... assigned separate duties and occupations and to those who sprang from his mouth, arms, thighs, and feet."<sup>7</sup> (manu, 1, 31, 87.)

A solidified caste structure, such as in India, involves the most extreme form of status hierarchy. The separation of caste from caste, however, does not prevent significant status differences from developing within the major divisions. Castes of any size always have their superior and privileged families. Individuals within the caste may differ in wealth, in occupational efficiency, in physical attainment and so on . In short, social classes may form within the broader caste divisions, a phenomenon set apart by strong barriers to social intercourse. The rigid demarcation of caste has been maintained by religious pursuance. The Hindu caste structure may have a reason out of the subjection incidental to conquest and also out of the subordination of one endogamous community to another.

B.R.Ambedkar had been disillusioned of the Hindu social order because of the atrocities committed on the Untouchables. The Manuvites involved with the ideology of the *Manusmriti* carried on this oppression. He came to realise that the Hindu social system was not a place for the Untouchable to take shelter. He was firmly convinced of incorrigibility of the Manuvites in this regard. He drafted the Hindu Code Bill but this could not be passed. Even the prime minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru betrayed him — he did not keep his promise given to Ambedkar in respect of passing the Hindu Code Bill. He, therefore, thought of working for the amelioration of the Scheduled Castes from outside the Hindu religion. In fact religion and society are integrally related to the Hindus. Hence, it is desirable to go outside the Hindu fold so as to bring in reform against the Hindu system. Here he played the role of an iconoclast.

In this connection he attacked the Godmen in Hinduism. On the occasion of the Buddha anniversary in Delhi in 1950, he spoke of the Buddha's religion as being best of morality. It was based on ethics and the Buddha acted as guide and not as a god. Other religions too spoke of gods. Krishna said that he was the God of Gods. Christ said that he was God's son and Mohammad said that he was the last messenger of God. All these religions and their founding fathers claimed infallibility for themselves and the founders called themselves the saviours. It was only the Buddha who spoke his role as a guide. In place of God in Buddhism there was morality, namely *Dhamma*. *Dharma* to the Hindu brahmins was *yajna* and sacrifice to God. The Buddha instituted morality, '*karuna*' and good work as the essence of *Dharma*. The social practice of Hinduism was inequality, whereas Buddhism stood for equality.

In his article entitled *Buddha and the Future of his Religion* which he contributed to the '*Mahabodhi Society Journal*,' Ambedkar summarised his thought on Buddhism thus <sup>8</sup> : “ (1) The society must have either the sanction of law or the sanction of morality to hold it together. Without either the society is sure to go to pieces. (2) Religion if it is to function must be in accord with reason which is another name for science. (3) It is not enough to consist of a moral code, but its moral code must recognise the fundamental tenets of liberty, equality and fraternity. (4) Religion must not sanctify or ennoble poverty.”

Ambedkar came to Bombay on May 5, 1950 and told the representative of the *Janata* a weekly edited by his son, that he was inclined to Buddhism, since the principles of Buddhism were abiding and were based on equality. This inclination ultimately led him to accept Buddhism. Meanwhile, Ambedkar went to Rangoon to attend the Third Buddhist World Conference. He declared that he would propagate Buddhism in India when equipped with proper means for the task. He had already achieved several things to that end. He described the provision for the study of Pali in the constitution, the inscription of a Buddhist aphorism on the frontage of the Rastrapati Bhavan in New Delhi and the acceptance of Asoke Chakra by India as her symbol. The Govt. of India had declared *Buddha Jayanti* as holiday mainly through his efforts. The new year, 1955 opened with the news that Ambedkar was going to embrace Buddhism. D. Valin

Singha general secretary of the Mahabodhy Society of India, Calcutta extended hearty congratulation to Ambedkar on his decision to embrace Buddhism in 1956. He observed that Ambedkar's name would go down in history as one of the greatest benefactors of humanity. If six crores of people in India accepted Buddhism, it would bring new life to the country.

A talk by Ambedkar was broadcast in May, 1956, from the British Broad Casting Corporation, London on "Why I like Buddhism and how it is useful to the world in its present circumstances." <sup>9</sup>

"I prefer Buddhism," he observed, "because it gives three principles in combination which no other religion does. Buddhism teaches *Prajna* (understand as against superstition and supernaturalism), *karuna* (love) and *samata* (equality). This is what man wants for a good and happy life, neither God nor soul can save society. Marxism and communism have shaken the religious systems of all the countries. He claimed that Buddhism was a complete answer to Marxism. Poverty cannot be an excuse for sacrificing human freedom. Once it is realised that Buddhism is a social gospel, its revival would be an everlasting event."

It would appear from the above study that Ambedkar had been protesting against the Hindu social system from the very beginning of his career, Buddhism was in his heart. A life long debate as to its acceptance within himself drove him to his conversion to Buddhism. He announced on September 23, 1956 that his conversion to Buddhism would take place at Nagpur on *Dassara* day October 14, 1956. between 9 A.M. and 11 A.M. To this end he invited Rev. Bhikshu Chandramani of Kushinara, Gorakpur district to Nagpur, to initiate into Buddhism on October 14. Ambedkar's Buddhism was a sort of Neo-Buddhism. After conversion he reminded the audience of his promise taken in 1935 that even though he was born Hindu, but he would not die as a Hindu. On the conversion date three lakhs of his followers embraced Buddhism.

Ambedkar also announced that he would launch a political party named Republican Party of India (R.P.I.). The Neo-Buddhist Movement in India prospered all along this. The R.P.I. was formed out of the A.I.S.C.F., which represented the Depressed and Backward Classes in India. The name S.C.F. was changed to R.P.I. in 1957 to give it a natural look. The R.P.I. initially devoted to the problems of landless labourers, of whom the Untouchables constituted major proportions. Under Gaekwad's leadership struggles of landless labourers began in Dhulia Jalgaon

and Nasik District and in parts of the Nagpur region. Nearly 50 thousand workers went to jail in 1959. Another massive *Satyagrah* was launched by the R.P.I. towards the end of 1964 to press the Govt. to distribute fallow and wasteland near the railway land and canal among the landless peasants. At the time of 1967 election, the Congress leaders worked out an alliance with the R.P.I.<sup>10</sup> This was the beginning of the R.P.I.'s political achievement.

B.R. Ambedkar played the dual role of a Hindu and a Buddhist. This is reflected in the title of the work : 'Socio-Religious Philosophy of B.R. Ambedkar and the Genesis of the Neo-Buddhist Movement in India.' Had Ambedkar died a Hindu he would still be remembered as a great social reformer, as an educationalist, and as a fighter for human rights. He would be honoured for the political, educational, and occupational safeguards he won on behalf of the Scheduled Castes . He would also be revered for the myth he embodied, the myth of a boy born in the mud of untouchability, who rose to a position of power and national influence without ever forgetting his people . But he did not die a Hindu ; he converted to Buddhism , and in so doing , offered his people some even stronger myths : the myth of spiritual and social rebirth, the myth of the Buddhist revival in India, and the myth of the *Dhamma* Revolution.<sup>11</sup>

The myths have survived because they have taken roots , not so much in the masses through whom they find their most spectacular impression, but in the heart of each one of Ambedkar's followers. Somehow these great myths have emerged and interacted with millions of individual patterns and personal myths, enriching them, directing them, galvanising them, amplifying the urge to growth and further unfoldment which is innate in us all.<sup>12</sup>

### Notes and References

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