

Dr.Ambedkar's *Buddha and His Dhamma* : Critical Approaches

Umesh B. Bansod

Assistant Professor–Department of English J.M. Patel College, Bhandara [M.S.] India

Abstract

Literature is the creative work. Similarly reading also becomes creative when readers read with critical approach. Their variety of opinions provide multifaceted dimensions which may not be anticipated even by the writer. But how judicious these critical approaches are, matters. There are certain conditions before commenting on *Buddha and His Dhamma*. The readers should be aware of the writer's intention, his formative influences, ideology he believes in and his psyche. Prejudiced mind may produce mala fide opinions. While reading *Buddha and His Dhamma* readers also must know what Dr.Ambedkar opines about the book. In the unpublished preface of the book Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar writes, "To disarm all criticism I would like to make it clear that I claim no originality for the book. It is a compilation and assembly plant. The material has been gathered from various books. I would particularly like to mention Ashvaghosha's *Buddhavita* [Buddhacharita], whose poetry no one can excel. In the narrative of certain events I have even borrowed his language. The only originality that I can claim in the order of presentation of the topics, in which I have tried to introduce simplicity and clarity. There are certain matters which give headache[s] to the student of Buddhism. I have dealt with them in the Introduction." This text was provided by Eleanor Zelliot, as prepared by Vasant Moon which was written by Babasaheb himself 6th April 1956. The above cited statement makes it clear that *Buddha and His Dhamma* is a collection of anthologies and as a disciplined scholar Dr. Ambedkar acknowledges it. The paper intends to verify the validity of few critical views on Dr.Ambedkar and on his *Buddha and His Dhamma*.

KEYWORDS : Dhamma, renunciation, canon

Preface :

The *Buddha and His Dhamma* is Dr. Ambedkar's magnum opus was written during the years 1951 – 1956 and published by the People's Education Society in November 1957, almost a year after the great leader's death. How intelligentsia in India and Buddhist world reacted is more interesting. Buddhist Journal, *The light of Dhamma*, wrote a highly critical review of the book, wherein Ambedkar was criticized for not citing his sources. The suggestion was even made that this was an intentional tactic on his part to hide the fabrication of sources in support of his ideology. This is the first allegation very commonly leveled against Dr. Ambedkar. But before leveling this allegation one question must be asked here. Which gospel or which religious book in the world cited its sources? If the answer is 'NO' why Dr. Ambedkar be targeted?¹ Adel Fiske and Christoph Emmrich in *The Use of Buddhist Scriptures in B.R.Ambedkar's the Buddha and His Dhamma* tried to clear this issue. They write "The omission has four

purposes. First, abbreviations of long, repetitive, or over detailed passages, necessary to limit the size and increase the impact of his book. Second, the omission of technicalities unsuited for the readers he envisaged, who needed an elementary and simple introduction to their new religion. Third, elimination usually [but not always] of miraculous and mythological elements, often by a rationalization of events. Fourth, the omission of doctrines contrary to his own interpretation of Buddhism, such as Karma, rebirth, and Nibbana." It is mere liberation theology, merely of social relevance. The book represents Ambedkar's thought at the expense of Buddha's.

Dr. Ambedkar is also criticized for politicizing Buddhist philosophy. But he said that his party men were more interested in politics than in religion but he was more interested in religion than in politics.

The reaction of the Buddhist world is also important. The first review that appeared in *Maha Bodhi* of Calcutta [Vol.67.No.12, December .1959] and the other appeared in *The Light of the Dhamma* of Rangoon, in January 1959. The reviewer "Jivaka" writes thus in the *Maha Bodhi*, "Indeed, the whole books explains the hatred and aggressiveness they [the new Buddhists] nourish and display. Ambedkar's Buddhism was based on Hate; the Buddha's on compassion. The title should be changed from the misleading one of *The Buddha and His Dhamma* to that of *Ambedkar and His Dhamma*. For he preaches non-dharma as Dharma for motives of political ambition and social reform."

The other reviewer in *The Light of the Dhamma* observes: "Although this was the book by a great man .unfortunately. It was not a great book which the author with all his manifold –virtues, was not fit to write ...the great doctor tampered with texts, and whenever he found views in Buddhism inconvenient to his own, denounced them as later accretions made by monks." Such was the hostile criticism of the book.

It is also said that Dr.Ambedkar failed to use imaginations in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. Some critic concludes that he lacks the power of imagination. How far this allegation if true? Is use of imagination mandatory in any literary work? Cannot writing be factual? Can it not be laced with logic? Is entertainment the only motto of literature? These and many more questions need to be addressed while analyzing Dr.Ambedkar's *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. Dr.Ambedkar was ever prosaic, ever pragmatic, ever the realist... was so eager to rewrite history that he never grasped the literary nature of his chosen task." But one more question can be raised here, was Dr.Ambedkar such a stubborn rationalist that he could not perceive the beauty of Literature? Or did citric feel that a man who belongs to untouchables cannot produce a fine piece of literature? These are all speculations. The hardcore research scholars like Dr.Ambedkar struggles lifelong to give sense to senseless and meaningless texts. He succeeded in creating his immovable place in the world of letters.

Ananya Vajpeyi in her "Portrayal of Ambedkar" ultimately interprets Ambedkar's unorthodox attempt to redefine Buddhism as a secret desire to engage with Brahmanism and to enter the domain of the high philosophical Indic tradition forbidden to him as an 'Untouchable'.

This interpretation appears to bias and baseless because Dr.Ambedkar did not beg for his place but created his place on the basis of his intellect, erudite scholarship and profound knowledge. He was not at the mercy of anybody.

Sona Kanti Barua wrote to Nepal Press society that there is a monopoly in Dr.Ambedkar's book as the author has assaulted our Buddhist common senses and did not follow any Buddhist text to insult the great renunciation of the Buddha in his book page number 27. He further accuses writer creating a character of Senapati out of his own imagination and he further claims that no Buddhist text supported Dr.Ambedkar's "Sakya-Koliya" war issue for Siddhartha Gautama [Buddha] to leave his kingdom for supreme enlightenment. He writes that many readers complained that Dr. B.R.Ambedkar did not make any systematic attempt to set out the life of Buddha according to the Buddhist Text. He says that in his book Ambedkar made the political darkness in Siddhartha's glorious great renunciation and the author was created the war conspiracy environment in blaming Siddhartha's offer of exile and confessed his ignorance in his writings. Targeting the incident of Buddha's exile Barua claims that there were no literary sources or even references to the offer of exile as given in Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan, Thai or any Buddhist Canons. He concludes, therefore, Ambedkar's book The Buddha and His Dhamma pages from 24 to 35 are pure fiction and there is no evidence in the Buddhist world. He is of the opinion that the author did not study it well and he misinterpreted the renunciation as the political punishment. He himself doubts that after author's death somebody may misinterpret the great renunciation of Prince Siddhartha as political punishment according to the Vessantara Jataka. [Jataka No.547]

Barua further writes Nobody could change the life of the Buddha, No one has the power to misrepresent it. The first aspects of the life of the Buddha and Buddhism are timeless, unchangeable and universal or cosmic truth. He says "Ambedkar was a politician and he discovered political and social issues in Buddhism. Does it mean that Mr. Barua has the right to reduce Buddhism to mere spirituality?

The above discussion reveals various allegations leveled by Son Kanti Barua. But the content of the article does not the reveal critics own authority on Buddhism. It appears that he himself is in ignorance of Buddhist knowledge. He says that anybody can not analyze Buddhism. The statement itself appears contradictory to Buddha's own philosophy. The writer in his paper has targeted the episode of Buddha's renunciation. It would have been better if he would have logically justified the incident of renunciation. But he did not. Picking only one episode and criticizing Dr.Ambedkar's efforts shows narrow mindedness of the critic. On the contrary Dr.Ambedkar's interpretations appears to more sound and logical. He found it an affront to common sense to suppose that a man of 29 would not have been exposed earlier. These are common events occurring by the hundreds and the Buddha could not have failed to come across them earlier. It is impossible to accept the traditional explanation that this was the first time he saw them. The explanation is not plausible and does not appeal to reasons.

The changes in emphasis are sometimes slight, sometimes crucial to Dr. Ambedkar's concepts. Some additions are significant, carrying the weight of his reinterpretations of the Buddhist doctrine. Some for text support his position with no change being necessary.

Another important aspect is that regarding Buddha's renunciation and enlightenment different texts give different versions. For example Ariyapariyesana Sutta [discourse of the noble quest] of the Majjhima Nikaya , informs that , he himself, at first, pursued what was subject to rebirth, decay and rest and then when reflected on their vanities, he was led to pursue the consummate peace of Nirvana, which is free from birth, death, decay, disease ,sorrow, and impurity . Contrary to the above, a passage from Anguttanikaya narrates a different version that when Siddhartha Gotama attained the age of twenty-nine, Devas felt that it was the right time for him to turn to spiritualism and so they created an instinct in him to visit the park ,he coincidentally met with poignant reflections of old age ,sickness and death. From then, the elation in his life disappeared. Later on, in the Nidanakatha this legend was further developed to give it a concrete shape, where the sight of a contemplating hermit was added to the earlier three poignant reflections.

The above discussion clears that fact that the Buddhist discourse has different opinions on the same incident of renunciation. If a prolific writer like Dr.Ambedkar doubts adulteration in Buddhism, there is a valid point to say so. And he has every right to vary on the basis of evidence and logic. A trained Barrister as Dr. Ambedkar was we should not hurry to comment that he writes without logic or evidence. The ambiguity, confusion, and adulteration authorize him to vary with every ambiguity in Buddhism.

As to the contrary to this view Prof.B.R.Salve writes in his paper that In the Book –I he gave a short biographical sketch of Buddha's life from his birth to taking of Parivraja, from Parivraja to his attainment of enlightenment and finally his new vision is explained on the basis of the thinking of his predecessors and contemporaries. In these expositions, we find that there are lots of differences in the book *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. Especially, the reason for taking Parivraja is not seeing the misery, for the first time of an old man, sick man, and a corpse. Instead, Dr. Ambedkar attributes the reasons of Parivraja to a conflict between his patriarchal Shakya Clan and matriarchal Koliya Clan. The source of this version may be from the fifth division of Sutta-Pitaka. In contrast to the traditional version, Dr. Ambedkar's expositions are probably more consistent and psychologically convincing and are of great human interest. This also brings out Buddha' s opposition to war and emphasis on peace as well resolution of conflicts through negotiation rather than through war. This version is more relevant in the technologically advanced society of today with the most sophisticated weapons of destruction such as nuclear, chemically and biological ones. The division of society in different castes and their assigned duty has been put forward as the injunction of the religion. To this traditional argument, Buddha counter-argued that Dhamma recognizes that, "enmity does not disappear by enmity but can only be conquered by love."

Conclusion:

Difference of opinion is the beauty of democracy and variety should be welcomed. It is also not healthy to expect that all should agree . Every individual has right to disagree .But as Dr.Ambedkar once stated that we have to think thousands of time before making one assertive statement. Opinions should be logical should meet certain reasonable conclusion. A person should be authoritative to opine . The above critical opinions failed to follow this discipline. Babasaheb Ambedkar lifelong remained

surrounded with controversies creating lot of heat but he had intellect at par excellence to defend .

References :

- Ambedkar , Dr.Babasaheb.*Writings And Speeches-Vol.11*.The Education Department. Government of Maharashtra-Bombay,1992.
- E-book of *Buddha and His Dhamma* by Dr.B.R.Ambedkar with unpublished preface written by Dr.Ambedkar .Text Provided by Eleanor Zelliot as prepared by Vasant Moon.
- Fiske Adel and Christoph Emmrich in *The Use of Buddhist Scriptures in B.R.Ambedkar's The Buddha and His Dhamma*
- Ghoshal U.N., 'Studies in Early Buddhist Historiography ', No.2 Vol. XVII, The Indian Historical Quarterly, June 1941.
- Hadole Shankarrao [Ed].*Dhamma Dikasha Samarambha: Dr.Babasaheb Ambedkar ynache v Bhashane*.
- Jaoul Nicolas ,researcher in Anthropology at CNRS ,National Centre for Scientific Research ,Paris .