

## INTRODUCTION

On 14th October 1956 Dr. B.R. (Babasaheb) Ambedkar renounced, what he called, Hindu *Dharma* and became a follower of the *Dhamma*, which according to him, was taught by the Buddha. That was a *Dusserah* day. *Dusserah* is an important festive day of the Hindus. The central rite of this day is to *cross* the *limits* of one's village or town and bring home the leaves of *Shamee* tree and distribute them among friends and relatives to express one's regard for them. The important thing is to *cross* the *limits* and make new beginnings. Having finished their agricultural operations the *Marāthā* warriors of the bygone days crossed their country on this day to make new victories. The name *Dusserah* has a strong association with the idea of breaking old ties and making new beginnings. In Dr. Ambedkar's case it was like crossing the Rubicon. It would be very unreasonable to suppose that Dr. Ambedkar did not choose this particular day for saying 'good bye' to Hinduism on account of that day's association with the idea of crossing the boundary. The boundary was set to the natural rights of free development of the *Dalits* by Hinduism.

A few points emerge (i) Dr. Ambedkar was opposed to Hindu *Dharma* but he was all for the *Dhamma*. In his mind there was a clear opposition between *Dharma* (Religion) and *Dhamma*. An attempt has to be made to understand this distinction and see how far the teachings of the Buddha are correctly interpreted by Dr. Ambedkar. (ii) For treading a new path Dr. Ambedkar chose a day which was significant for the Hindus. This would mean that he had no intention to sever ties with the culture as it grew in this land. He was opposed, tooth and nail, only to the religion that was part of an ancient culture. I would like to evaluate Dr. Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddha's doctrine - the *Dhamma* on this back drop.

The present undertaking is an attempt to understand, appreciate and to evaluate Dr. Ambedkar's *magnum opus*, 'The Buddha and His *Dhamma*'. Throughout this work, I have used the 3rd edition, the 1984 edition, of that book. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations in this thesis are from this book, and their location is indicated by putting the page number first and then after a dot (.) the printed number of the paragraph.

In his introduction to the book, Dr. Ambedkar has raised certain problems. He asks there (Page XI) 'Is it not necessary that these problems should be solved and the path for the understanding of Buddhism made clear?' He ends the introduction with these words, "I hope my questions will excite the readers to come and make their contribution to their solutions."

Well! I am a reader of the book. I am excited, and I will come and make my contribution to the solution of the problems which Dr. Ambedkar has raised in the introduction and I shall also discuss in this thesis certain other problems which naturally arise from what he says in this book. But my main concern would be his concept of *Dhamma* and the distinction which he makes between religion and *Dhamma*. I shall begin with that. Then will come a discussion of his social philosophy.

I shall remember throughout that Dr. Ambedkar was not a mere theoretician. Like the Buddha himself his approach is very practical. I have to remember that his main concern was to explain and PROPAGATE *Dhamma*. It was for raising the moral and spiritual level of his countrymen. He thought that this could best be done by making them follow the path of the *Dhamma* as taught by the Buddha.

Let me dwell here a little (more will come later on) on the word *Dhamma* as used by Dr. Ambedkar. Obviously, *Dhamma* is the *Pāli* form of the *Sanskrit* word '*dharma*.' *Dharma* is an amorphous word and has a wide range of meanings some of them shading each into the other. '*Dharma*' might mean such a simple thing as the property of a substance as for example burning is a *dharma* of fire or it might mean the highly complex emotion of religiosity. One very popular meaning of '*dharma*' is what is expressed by the English word "religion." Ambedkar is of the view that religion is encrusted with many irrational accretions, but Buddha's teachings were entirely rational. 'So,' says Ambedkar, 'Buddha could not have taught religion.' Therefore, Buddha's '*Dhamma*' is neither the *Sanskrit* '*dharma*' nor the English 'religion.' He has said at length, how exactly to distinguish, on several counts, religion from '*Dhamma*'.

That discussion will occupy us in the body of the thesis. For the moment, it is enough to say that whatever is '*Dhamma*' it is not the same thing as '*dharma*' or

'religion'. (I have here to state, however, that expressions like 'Buddha's religion' are abundant in the book.)

The first question that would naturally arise is on what basis does Ambedkar say that Buddha's *Dhamma* is rational? He has said, "It preaches rationalism and Buddhism is nothing if not rationalism." (175.21) The evidence which he adduces will have to be sifted. Here, the major task will be to elucidate the meaning of 'rational' with all its nuances and overtones. I shall give my answer to the question whether and how far is Buddhism rational. After giving a critical statement of his social philosophy I shall take up, separately, each of the problems that Ambedkar has set out in his introduction without changing their order. The questions are:-

- 1) "The first problem relates to the main event in the life of the Buddha, namely, '*Parivraja*.' Why did the Buddha take *Parivraja*? The traditional answer is that he took *Parivraja*, because he saw a dead person, a sick person and an old person. This answer is absurd on the face of it. The Buddha took *Parivraja* at the age of 29. If he took *Parivraja* as a result of these three sights, how is it he did not see these three sights earlier? These are common events occurring by 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 that he saw them. The explanation is not plausible and does not appeal to reason. But if this is not the answer to the question, what is the real answer?
- 2) "The second problem is created by the Four *Aryan* Truths. Do they form part of the original teachings of the Buddha? This formula cuts at the root of Buddhism. If life is sorrow, death is sorrow and rebirth is sorrow, then there is an end of everything. Neither religion nor philosophy can help a man to achieve happiness in the world. If there is no escape from sorrow, then what can religion do, what can Buddha do to relieve man from such sorrow which is ever there in birth itself? The Four *Āryan* Truths are a great stumbling block in the way of non-Buddhists accepting the gospel of Buddhism. For the Four *Āryan* Truths make the gospel of the Buddha a gospel of

pessimism. Do they form part of the original gospel or are they later accretion by the monks?"

- 3) "The third problem relates to the doctrine of soul, *karma* and rebirth. The Buddha denied the existence of the soul. But he is also said to have affirmed the doctrine of karma and rebirth. At once a question arises. If there is no soul, how can there be *karma*? If there is no soul, how can there be rebirth? These are baffling questions. In what sense did the Buddha use the words *karma* and rebirth? Did he use them in a different sense than the sense in which they were used by the Brahmins of his day? If so, in what sense? Did he use them in the same sense in which the *Brahmins* used them? If so, is there not a terrible contradiction between the denial of the soul and the affirmation of *karma* and rebirth? This contradiction needs to be resolved.
- 4) "The fourth problem relates to the *Bhikkhu*. What was the object of the Buddha in creating *Bhikkhu*? Was the object to create a perfect man? Or was his object to create a social servant devoting his life to service of the people and being their friend, guide and philosopher? This is a very real question. On it depends the future of Buddhism. If the *Bhikkhu* is only a perfect man he is of no use to the propagation of Buddhism because though a perfect man he is a selfish man. If, on the other hand, he is a social servant he may prove to be the hope of Buddhism. This question must be decided not so much in the interest of doctrinal consistency but in the interest of the future of Buddhism."

Having answered the problems which Ambedkar has expressly raised I shall take up some issues which naturally arise out of his book viz. (i) Ambedkar's views on *Upanisads* and their teachings and (ii) his appraisal of the *Samkhya* system.

As was said above the most important thing in Dr. Ambedkar's thought is his distinction between *dharma* and *Dhamma*. Chapter I of this thesis will be an appraisal of this distinction.