Chapter V

RELEVANCE OF AMBEDKAR’S NEO-BUDDHISM
Relevance of Ambedkar’s Neo-Buddhism

This chapter shows how Ambedkar examined many aspects of philosophical, religious and social preachings of Buddha through his writings. He shows how Buddhism can free the society from the evils of non-morality and inequality and encourages the values of fellow-feelings and human dignity. Ambedkar’s Buddhism is relevant in today’s times for world peace. The chapter contains substantial information about Buddhism such as: three jewels of Buddhism, Four Noble Truth, Noble eight fold path, and the basic precepts in Buddhism. This chapter also examines how Ambedkar redefined Buddhism and heralds the revisiting the already incepted neo-Buddhism. The chapter argues that the foundations of Buddhist tradition and practice are the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma: the teachings, and the Sangha: the community. Adherence to these three jewels distinguishes a Buddhist from a non-Buddhist. The Four Noble Truths, which provide a conceptual framework for Buddhist thought, are regarded as central to the teachings of Buddhism. The Noble Eightfold Path which is believed to cause complete cessation of dukkha are the eight interconnected factors or conditions. These eight factors are: Right View (or Right Understanding), Right Intention (or Right Thought), Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right
Concentration. Buddhism lays down the five precepts or the Śīlas which is usually translated into English as "virtuous behavior", "morality", "ethics" or "precept". It is an action committed through the body, speech, or mind, and involves an intentional effort. It indicates to moral purity of thought, word, and deed. The four conditions of śīla are chastity, calmness, quiet, and extinguishment.

Ambedkar aimed at a humane religion based on logic and reasoning, human experience, the most appropriate elixir available at the given time in the history. In his Buddha and his Dhamma, Ambedkar analysed Buddhism and tried to concretise it in order to make it fluid, reliable and acceptable. The first section of the chapter explains Dr Ambedkar examined many aspects of philosophical, religious and social preachings of Buddha through his writings. The second section connects it to the current context. The third examines its relationship to peace.

I

Redefining Buddhism: Ambedkar

Ambedkar’s neo Buddhism was a religion based on rational human experience. As Justice Bhole remarks, “His religion had the glory of having rightly judged the intrinsic greatness of man’s capacity to work
out his salvation without any extraneous aid…” (“Preface”, vii). The foundations of Buddhist tradition are the three ethical principles of: the Buddha, the Dharma: the teachings, and the Sangha: the community. For Ambedkar, the Buddha is the enlightened one, it is a concept, and notion of wisdom, not a specific person. The Dhamma is the teachings or law of nature and a way of life. The Sangha is a congregation of monastic practitioners, it means a group, organisation or a commune. The avoidance of unwholesome actions and the cultivation of positive actions is called śīla or ethical virtuous conduct. The Four Noble Truths, provide a conceptual framework for Buddhist thought, are regarded as central to the teachings of Buddhism. These four truths explain the nature of dukkha (suffering, anxiety), its causes, and paths to overcome it. They are:

1. The truth of dukkha (suffering, anxiety, dissatisfaction)
2. The truth of the origin of dukkha
3. The truth of the cessation of dukkha
4. The truth of the path leading to the cessation of dukkha

The truth of dukkha of dukkha is translated as suffering, anxiety, dissatisfaction, unease and is caused by obvious suffering due to physical and mental illness, aging, and dying. Secondly, due to unrest caused by the stress of trying to cope with constantly changing things;
and subtle dissatisfaction about life which is momentary. Buddhism believes that the origin of dukkha can be known and is commonly explained as craving or trishna (insatiable desire) conditioned by ignorance. The other two noble truths state that it is possible to eradicate the causes of suffering by following the Buddhist Eightfold path. It is the complete cessation of dukkha are the eight interconnected factors or conditions. However, Ambedkar was critical of Buddha’s emphasis on suffering in the four noble truths, which he felt had made “a gospel of pessimism” (xlii). If life and re-birth are filled with sorrow there is no way out of the same; indeed following the eight-fold path too would not help. Hence, Ambedkar proposed that the pessimistic emphasis of the four noble truths should change and the notion of suffering should be redefined as social suffering.

These eight factors are: Right View (or Right Understanding), Right Intention (or Right Thought), Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. The eight factors of the path are commonly presented as right view, which means that one should have unbiased approach towards truth or reality. Right intention is the ethical intention of renunciation, freedom and harmlessness. Right speech consists in truth telling, right action is non-violence, Right livelihood is honesty, right effort is to make life
free from suffering. Right mindfulness indicates awareness to see things for what they are with clear consciousness and lastly right concentration is the characteristic path suggesting the correct meditation or concentration.

Buddhism lays down Śīlas, which are principles of ethical behaviour which are connected to the four noble truths and the eightfold path discussed above.

The five precepts are the ways to live a better, happy and satisfied life free of all worries.

1. Abstention from violence, ahimsā.
2. Abstention from taking or possessing what is not one’s own (not committing theft).
3. Abstention from sensual (including sexual) misconduct.
4. Abstention from lying (speaking truth always).
5. Abstention from intoxicants which lead to loss of mindfulness (specifically, drugs and alcohol).
6. Abstention from eating at the wrong time (eat only from sunrise to noon).
7. To abstain from dancing and playing music, wearing jewelry and cosmetics, attending shows and other performances.
8. To abstain from using high or luxurious seats and bedding.

9. To abstain from luxuries.

10. To abstain from accepting gold and silver.

Ambedkar redefined these basic tenets as offered a religion based on undeniable logic and reasoning, a religion made from human experiences and he explained it in his work, Buddha and his Dhamma. After debating and refining Buddhism, in a series of private and public meetings and numerous articles and books, Ambedkar proposed Buddhism to the untouchables as the only way to gain a dignified human status. Ambedkar publicly converted to Buddhism on October 14, 1956, at Deekshabhoomi, Nagpur and several others followed him. The ceremony was more than a religious conversion ceremony, it was a peaceful revolution, an act of freedom and a successful attempt to do away with a dogmatic blot on humanity. The converted population called itself "Nava-Baudha" or new Buddhists. Dr. Ambedkar's Neo Buddhism includes twenty two vows, they are-

1. non faith in Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara, nor shall I worship them.

2. non faith in Rama and Krishna, who are believed to be incarnation of God, nor shall I worship them.
3. Non faith in *Gauri, Ganapati* and other gods and goddesses of Hindus nor shall I worship them.

These first three vows, Ambedkar advises renunciation of the Hindu gods and goddesses which form the core of Hindu mythology, rites and rituals.

4. Non belief in the incarnation of God.

Faith in incarnations of gods and goddesses support the idea of rebirth and life after death which is unacceptable from Buddhist point of view because gods and goddesses themselves are perpetrators of a discriminatory and inhuman caste system.

5. Rejection of the notion that Lord Buddha was the incarnation of Vishnu. I believe this to be sheer madness and false propaganda. There had been attempts to integrate Buddhism with Hinduism by describing Buddha as one of the incarnations of the central Hindu deity Vishnu. Ambedkar attacks the assumption and distances Buddhism from Hinduism because incorporation of Buddhism into Hinduism would lead to subordination of Buddhism to Hinduism and hence Ambedkar denounces such an attempt as complete madness and false propaganda.
6. Non performance of *Shradh* or *pind-dan*.

Renouncement of *shradh* and *pind-dan* indicates negation of Hindu rituals which form essential part of human life according to the Vedic Hindu Dharma.

7. Non acceptance of ceremonies performed by Brahmins.

Jyotirao Phule, another social reformer of Maharashtra had depicted religious ceremonies as a means of exploitation of common man by the Brahmins.

8. Renunciation of Hinduism, which disfavours humanity and impedes the advancement and development of humanity because it is based on inequality, and adopt Buddhism as my religion.

9. Sincere following of Buddhist principles and an earnest urge to follow the Buddhism to its spirit, principles and teaching of the Buddha.

10. Belief in the equality of all beings

This is a democratic principle added to his version of Buddhism by Dr. Ambedkar. This should be taken as the core principal which resist Hinduism.

11. Dedicating oneself to establishing equality.
12. Following Buddha’s eightfold path.

13. Following the ten *paramitas* prescribed by the Buddha.

14. Compassion and loving-kindness for all living beings and protect them.

15. Non stealing.


17. Not committing carnal sins.

18. Non consumption of intoxicants like liquor, drugs, etc.

19. Following the eightfold path and practice compassion and loving-kindness in everyday life.

20. Accepting the Dhamma of Buddha as the only true religion.


22. Leading life according to the principles and teachings of the Buddha and his Dhamma (Ambedkar, “22 vows”)

Ambedkar's Buddhism defines itself against Hinduism. The anti-discriminatory ethos of equality was inserted by Ambedkar in Buddhism and it can be argued that this is anti-discriminatory stand is a major contribution of Ambedkar to Buddhism. His version of Buddhism thus is very radical.
Relevance of Neo Buddhism in the current context

Ambedkarism, is not merely a political movement but it stands for social service or social justice. Transcending everything, it stands for social transformation and economic emancipation also. Neo Buddhism transformed lives of millions since it is the most rational of all religions and is based on human experiences instead of spiritual and mystical philosophy. This is the religion with a progressive outlook and leaves all dogma behind. Neo Buddhism does not merely stand for unity but establishment of a Bahujan Samaj. One way to understand the mechanics of Bahujan Samaj is that people should forget their differences and gain power from heir unity to bring about change and social justice. Given its commitment to social change it has the potential to eradicate evils such as wars, terrorism, poverty and globalisation.

One of the contemporary challenges of the present era is terrorism. Religious fanaticism and intolerance is one of the causes of war and terrorism. The world has faced innumerable major and minor terrorist strikes in the last five decades. The disorder wrecked all over the world by such attacks is beyond imagination. Neo Buddhism, with its adherence to peace and non violence can offer a solution to world peace.
The two world wars of twentieth century, and other wars such as the Vientnam War, the Gulf war and many terrorist attacks like 9/11 and 26/11 have proved that the production of advanced weapons and maintenance of huge armed forces is not the ultimate deterrent to any attack. Those who had been militarily powerful, had resorted to kill others for either political, ideological or religions reasons. Thus, one of the most important practitioners of Buddhism, The Dalai Lama had proposed that one recognises the need to stop production and proliferation of weapons of tremendous destructive power as only material progress cannot guarantee peace and end violence. There is a need to recognise that human happiness could only be achieved by non-violence, peace and the protection of the natural environment.” - (The Dalai Lama, May 2, 2007, 12.05am IST)

Another contemporary challenge is poverty. Buddha and Ambedkar were both committed to end inequality and establish peace. Recognizing that caste and income are complexly interlinked, Dr Ambedkar aimed to bring about equality through conversion. Lower the caste in the social ladder, lesser the income. Dr. Ambedkar decision to convert to neobuddhism has changed millions of lives in India positively in terms of income and social status. Since the abortion of caste system the income parity has improved but a lot needs to be done. The
momentum of the Dalit movement needs to be maintained so that the marginalised make to the mainstream in this era of rapid change.

Neo Buddhism also has the potential to challenge globalisation. Buddhism is non-metaphysical and rational religion. It is one of the four major religions in the world today. It does not accept the supernatural or anything which is extrasensory perception. In technology ruled world the relevance of the teachings of the Buddha is needed to be outlined.

The globalised, dynamic, complex and hectic word does not offer peace and true bliss, in spite of the numerous amenities available for easy living and pleasure. People are both physically and mentally dissatisfied and lack a feeling of secure existence. Both satisfaction and security are experience of the mind. Buddha discovered the root cause of suffering as *trishna*, desire or craving. The Buddhist teachings suggest that mind is the forerunner and mental states are mind made. One's mind is the most significant thing in one's life. According to the teachings of the Buddha, man is the component of five aggregates, namely: form, feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness. Of the five only form is physical and the other four are mental. These mental faculties are of great import in contemplating man. In the world ruled by materialism, only physical benefits and pleasures are given a lot of importance and the mental faculties are neglected. Religion has not lost significance in
modern life, rather its importance has grown and magnified by the dire need of spiritual peace. Spiritual peace serves to organise human consciousness and functions as its centre so that the mind doesn’t go astray. Buddhism is all about obtaining full control of mind and experience the reality of life and the happiness which it yields. This is the time even for scientists to open out and think of the other dimensions of life. A Religion like Buddhism, cannot be set aside any more. Most of the world populations follow different religions. Buddhism is a rich source self-knowledge and recognition for every man and his mental and physical development.

In today’s world, material progress is paramount and fetish and desire for commodities is a norm. The world has become skeptical about everything but religion. Buddhism, as redefined and refined by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, is the first rational religion of the world. It is as rational as rational as science since it follows the same empirical process to understand why we do suffer. Therefore it can be stated that the modern civilization which is rational should have rational religion like Buddhism which provides us with insight about human nature (Bhikkhu Seelananda, Paramita kadugannawa. 09.04.2000). Buddhism as a religion stands for tolerance and peace. It prescribe that one should not honour only one’s own religion and condemn the religions of others, but one should
honour others’ religion for this or that reason. So, doing, one helps one’s own religion to grow and renders service to the religions of others too. In acting otherwise one digs the grave of one’s own religion and condemns other religion, does so indeed through devotion to his own religion (Naik 414). Regarding human concern, Buddha had prescribed that one ought to treat others with love and reverence( 413). The following section discusses the relevance of Buddhist ethics.

III

Relevance of Buddhist Ethics

Religion is universal feature of human society. The society is in a state of flux of complex dynamic cultures and religions. Yet, atheism, scepticism, pragmatism, and indifference are the more popular norms. Ethics as code of conduct has been undergoing many changes through the long course of time across history. The modern age has been complex in its orientation. Almost all religions have a long history. Most of them were born in the time when the people believed in magic and were very superstitious; the world had been very different than today's world. History has proved that religions do not die easily. The Buddha preferred to deal with real life experiences rather than the complex metaphysical problems. Buddhism dealt with problems of common
people and their suffering. The Buddha made full use of logic, debate and reasoning to resolve philosophical dilemmas. Individual is responsible for his own actions which spring out of his desire and if desire is the cause of suffering then it is possible to overcome suffering by controlling desire. Buddhism emphasis upon free and rational inquiry that appealed to the modern mind. The Buddha didn't advocate blind faith, or belief in scripture or tradition. He advised people to examine and experience things for themselves, then accept them. He said that the mind free of prejudices will really be able to so see and truly understand. We should not be carried away by either praise or criticism but weigh merits and demerits of things before acting on them. If we follow Buddha communal violence will be thing of the past. People will not fall prey the instigations made by the antisocial elements leading to any king of misunderstandings that generally lead to communal violence.

The Buddha’s doctrine is not only social and intra-personal but it is also concerned with human relationships and society at large. Education, judiciary, law and order enforcing agencies are useful countermeasures for controlling violence. But they always fail to penetrate to the core of human motivation and alter one’s basic ambitions and response patterns which are the source of violence in human behaviour. Neo Buddhism is a system of psychological principles and practices that an individual can
apply for the benefit of its own spiritual advancement and emotional wellbeing. Thus, the prime value of Buddhism in the modern world is that it shows one a way to happiness and peace of mind within a violent political and social environment.

One such evil that Ambedkar was closely concerned with was caste system. Thus his Buddhism aimed to dismantle it. Any person who became a Buddhist ceased to have caste identity and thus was no longer subject to caste regulations. This was a kind of a social revolution which resulted in men and women to escape from social injustice. The Buddha refuted the religious and philosophical rationalizations by which the priests and ruling castes attempted to justify the institution. In similar manner he opposed slavery and elevated the social status of women. If a form of governance cultivates justice, charity, compassion and virtue, both for the prosperity of the nation and as an example for the government ministers and common citizens. A state would continue to flourish so long as the citizens could assemble and meet in harmony and would maintain good moral standards. Order through inner motivation and mutual understanding is the call of Buddhism and the basis of a just political order. The Buddha also preached universal welfare and happiness. Its primary concern is the elimination of suffering by elimination of its root causes of greed, anger, delusion. Buddhism is the
strongest possible solution available to hasten the drive for equality. It is the answer to all types of discrimination. Buddhism can propagate universal brotherhood.

Thus, Ambedkar’s Buddhism is relevant in all times, not just the present. Since the basic human problems still persist and may continue to do so. Practicing Buddhist, the Dalai Lama makes a distinction between Buddhist science, Buddhist philosophy, and Buddhist religion. And he says that Buddhist science and Buddhist philosophy have a great deal to offer to everybody. And even meditation is something that can be useful to anybody as a way of training our minds and helping us to develop more beneficial attitudes toward life. Buddhism prescribes peaceful, compassionate and responsible ways of life and thus it is widely accepted all over the world.

The Buddhist teaching of the law of karma offers people a just, incorruptible foundation and reason for living a moral life. It is easy to see how Ambedkar’s wider embracing of karma – without reading it literally as rebirth- would lead any country towards a stronger, more caring and virtuous society. For it stresses on righteous actions and an ethical society. Ambedkar noted how according to the Buddha an ethical society provided the foundation for political integrity (Buddha and His Dhamma, 299). The latter entailed pursuing the path of peace,
without initiating wars. Ambedkar cited how the Buddha indicted Ajatasatru, the king of Magadha for invading Kasi and its king Pasenadi (300). In a future reversal, the king Pasenadi in turn defeated Ajatasatru and took away his entire kingdom. The Buddha’s message was to stay away from conquest. “Conquest engenders hate: the conquered lives in misery. But whoso is at peace and passionless, happily doth he live; conquest hath he abandoned and defeat” (Ibid). On the basis the deeds performed a person who ruins is ruined in return, according to the Buddha. Moreover, Ambedkar notes that the victor in any battle has a duty to pursue peace and especially the reform and welfare of the person who is vanquished. Thus, he cites the Buddha as saying “May creatures all abound, in weal and peace; may all be blessed with peace always; all creatures weak and strong, all creatures great and small; creatures unseen or seen dwelling afar or near, born or awaiting birth, may be blessed with peace!” (301)

While human development has made significant advances, one also finds that the pressure of modern life, the rivalry for survival, the rivalry for doing better than the other, the desire to live a life of competition economically, politically, culturally, In order to relieve these tensions human beings have evolved more and more recreations and relaxations. They apparently result in slight relaxation of the tensions but seem to
take people more and more into a vicious circle. Because of the tensions one engages oneself in a variety of escapist activities, and because these escapist activities take too much time, one has to catch up with the process of survival, only to oneself in a worse period of tremendous tension. The greater the economic progress, the greater the political enlightenment, the more the people need sedatives and tranquilizers to keep themselves doing their normal duties. Buddhist principle of rebirth places the present short lifetime of into a broader perspective, giving more meaning to the vital events of birth and death. The understanding of rebirth removes tragedy and grief surrounding death and turns ones attention to the quality of a life, rather than its mere length. From the very beginning the practice of meditation has been at the very heart of the Buddhist way. Today, meditation grows increasingly popular as its proven benefits to both mental and physical well-being are becoming more widely known. When stress is shown to be such a major cause of human suffering, the quieting practice of meditation becomes ever more valued. Today’s world is too small and vulnerable for us to live angrily and alone, and thus tolerance, love and compassion are so very important. These qualities of mind, essential for happiness, are formally developed in Buddhist meditation and then diligently put into practice in everyday life. Ambedkar’s Buddhism prescribes a kind of meditation of thought speech and action that brings about social justice and peace.
Forgiveness, gentleness, harmlessness and peaceful compassion are its basic tenets and can play a big role in world peace and promoting tolerance.

It is the Buddha and his life, the doctrine, the ethical culture that is central to Buddhism. It is unique in a way that a person may not know scriptures and perform ritual to be a Buddha, one can find what is relevant to each one's experiences from this vast culture, religion, or literature, or religious experiences. Buddhism had been innately flexible and adaptable. It keeps on adjusting to the needs of different eras, populations, individuals. So if Buddhism has an application today and if Buddhism has a place in modern life, it is because of that timeless relevance, emanating from a set of eternal values. It accepted both eternity and change alike. The characteristic of timelessness comes from the fact that it had understood that everything continues, but continues in a flux, in a process of continuing change and evolution. Thus Buddhism was able to adjust to different times and civilizations. Therefore any aspect of Buddhism is something relevant and applicable for all times.
Buddhism is a kind of refuge in a community and teachings of Buddha that enables humans to evolve a life of their own. What is very significant today is that there may be thousands of people who have never gone into a Buddhist temple, never got into the ritualistic set-up which has evolved in the Buddhist countries, but who in their own heart have seen the validity of the message of the Buddha and who are leading a life according to the tenets of Buddhism. In fact, we are finding that a vast majority of the world’s population hold allegiance to the Buddha for one reason or another. Buddhism prescribes attachment to passions as the source of evil, modern developments have shown that it results in insecurity, stress and boredom, thus, Ambedkar’s Buddhism prescribes rationality and logical thinking as the way towards Buddhism. Contrary to his aspirations, Dr. Ambedkar is been projected in different ways as the maker of the Indian Constitution, a Bodhisatva, a messiah, a staunch anti-Communist, a social engineer who believed in the reform process and disliked revolutions. But he was a visionary who wanted to make human society free of discrimination, injustice and inequality. Thus, his vision is far from being realised. The situation of the Dalits though is gradually improving, untouchability has not been abolished as caste system still exists. Only a few of them have attained a little prosperity with the help of certain state policies like reservation and political patronage. In social terms however, all dalits, irrespective of their
economic standing, still suffer oppression. This social oppression varies from the crudest variety of untouchability, still being practised in rural areas, to the sophisticated forms of discrimination encountered even in the modern sectors of urban life. Although, the statistics indicate that dalits have made significant progress on almost all parameters during the last five decades, the relative distance between them and non-dalits seems to have remained the same or has increased. And hence there is a dire need for review of the current assimilation policies.

Ambedkar’s thoughts are variously presented by scholars. Ranging from academic study to biographical studies, generally Ambedkar studies lack or underscore his vision of a just equal society free from casteism and more so the futuristic dimension, which are essentially the attributes of the holistic conception. Ambedkar strategized his way through the political maze around him, winning for dalits the maximum he could in a short span of time. In process, his role also underwent transformation with the expanse of the battleground. Inevitably, his thoughts and action always remained context-laden, polemical and pragmatically purposeful. It is therefore a relatively difficult task to discern a coherent vision underscoring the life work of Babsaheb Ambedkar. The combination of factors like his high stature, his devotion to the cause of his people; the historical setting in which he
lived, the low level of literacy and political consciousness in masses; and the vested interests of internal as well as external people have been its cause lead to iconisation of Dr. Ambedkar and the revolution he lead is it lost its momentum after his death. The leaders of the *dalit* masses after Ambedkar couldn't utilise the momentum to take the benefits of the revolution to the target group.

Yet, Ambedkar and his Buddhism is extremely relevant today and the has potential to solve the problems of individuals and societies belonging to any faith of the world in the imminent complex and fast future time. Buddhism, as proposed by Ambedkar is the religion of all the people for all the times. It can effectively appease the religious fanaticism and fundamentalism which has been responsible for the violence that has been raging across human history. Buddhism is the golden mean of the ideal and the practicable. It is the religion which preaches equality, not hierarchy like other religions. Yet it respects other religion. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was the visionary who realised this potential of the ancient Indian religion and used it to free millions of depressed people from the wretched perpetual slavery of generations. He was a true hero of Indian freedom struggle who understood the real meaning of freedom and self rule and tried to extend it to the people who really and desperately needed it. Ambedkarite revolution has made a
drastic change in the lived of the millions of depressed people. It needs to be continued with the same vigour since discrimination and exploitation still persists in more or less altered forms in the modern India. Under the shining visage of the rapidly developing nation the benefits of the growth are being reaped by a few people largely belonging to the upper castes. A telling account of such discrimination is outlined by Thorat and Newman in their book *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination in Modern India*. There is a great need to unite and agitate to accomplish the goal of the Ambedkarite revolution. The relevance of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar still persists and will continue to do so. He emerges as the all time champion of the humanity.