Chapter IV

HUMAN DIGNITY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY
Human Dignity and Cultural Identity

This chapter is an attempt to deal with the concepts of human dignity, cultural identity in the light of Buddhism with reference to Ambedkar’s philosophy of the same. Human dignity is the core value of traditional as well as neo-Buddhism. According to Dr. Ambedkar, it is a pre requisite to meaningful cultural identity, which was not marked by discrimination. Members of the former ‘untouchable’ castes like Mahars, Maangs and Chambars were not allowed to mix with those belonging to the privileged castes like the Brahmmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas. Hindu texts such as the ‘Laws of Manu’ viewed their very presence as polluting; as a result they were confined to menial labour and drudgery. Negative discriminatory religious identity denied a section of people of human dignity for centuries. A key feature of Buddhism was its rejection of essential identity- human beings did not enter the world with a fixed identity. Nor were they confined to a restricted notion of work. Rather, from the point of view of Buddhism, all human beings were products of their action. Hence, all human life- indeed all life was deeply valuable and had inherent dignity. Ambedkar adopted the perspective of Buddhism precisely due to its commitment to dignity. As several thinkers have observed, Ambedkar’s ‘Buddha and His Dhamma’ reinterprets the Buddhist ideals for the purpose of restoring
dignity to the oppressed (Rodrigues, 1993; Queen, 1994; Gokhale 2008b). This chapter explores Ambedkar’s argument that social justice requires and egalitarian cultural identity through a conversion to Buddhism. It also argues that the notion of human dignity is closely linked to human rights for Ambedkar. It is only through the acquisition of dignity that human beings can become rights-bearing individuals. The process of being recognized as equals within a non-stratified community is for Ambedkar spelled out by Buddhism. Thus, human dignity is a key concern in any discussion of human rights. Humans are believed to be able to concretely sense and experience one's own dignity. The recognition of the self leads to crucial understanding of human existence and by relating oneself to the other individuals in the given community, one acknowledges one’s own role and rights within the community. Human rights originate in the human dignity. In Buddhism, the basis of human dignity is our identity with the universal, cosmic life, and our capacity to awaken to the wisdom and compassion inherent in all life. It is the fundamental nature of life to evolve toward self-realization and self-perfection. Human dignity is doesn’t vary according to the capacities of individuals. It is essentially independent of such norms as the decision making or contributing ability of Individuals. It is argued that cultural identity is the identity imposed by the culture to which the given individual or group belongs on the individual or group. It reveals
to an individual or groups and others what they are. It gives expression to our nature in our manner of living and of thinking, in art, religion, ethical aspirations, and knowledge. The chapter implies that Buddhism accords the cultural identity and human dignity.

Stating about Dr Ambedkar’s philosophy, it is said that self-respect and human dignity were of paramount importance in a free republic. He espoused the noble cause of equality of status and opportunity to every Indian, assuring the dignity of the individual and unity of the nation. He was not merely a learned man, but also an intellectual who sacrificed his life for the dignity and uplift of the poorest of the poor of the world. His aim was not communal and not limited to personal benefit, but it was essentially social and human, related to all who suffered from slavery, injustice, tyranny and exploitation. His concept of social justice, which has been derived from ethical morality. The chapter includes Dr Ambedkar’s contention that political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of social democracy, which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life. This chapter elaborates Ambedkar’s interpretation of Buddhism a humanism and leading to a philosophy on social transformation.
The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section is an explanation of Ambedkar and his view on human dignity. The second his views on social reconstruction and lastly his views on conversion.

I

Vidya, Pradnya, Karuna and Maitri

The underprivileged castes according to Ambedkar suffered the stigma of untouchability, and were deprived of the basic human rights, the right to education, and their degraded position that was sanctified by the religious law books. Texts from the Hindu religion degraded the so-called ‘untouchables’; thus, they were not allowed to listen to the Vedas or recite them. Very few social reformers fought against this unnatural institutions and atrocities. Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj, Periyar E. V. Ramaswamy and B. R. Ambedkar were some of them. As argued above, in his ‘Philosophy of Hinduism’ Ambedkar argued that caste is not based on division of labour. It is division of labourers. As an economic organization also, caste is a harmful institution. He calls upon the Hindus to annihilate the caste which is a great hindrance to social solidarity and to set up a new social order based on the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity in consonance with the principles of Democracy. He advocates inter-caste
marriage as one of the solutions to the problem. But he stresses that the belief in the ‘shastras’ is the root cause of maintaining castes. He therefore suggests, “make every man and woman free from the thralldom of the ‘shastras’, cleanse their mind of the pernicious notions founded on the ‘shastras’ and he or she will interdine and intermarry”. According to him, the society must be based on reason and not on atrocious traditions of caste system. The second section is an explanation of his philosophy of social reconstruction.

Ambedkar’s works, *Who Were the Shudras?* (1947) and *The Untouchables* (1948) analyzes in detail the plight of the lower castes ‘Shudras’ and ‘untouchables’ to instill a sense of revolt and arouse in men and women the passion for right relations. His purpose was practical rather than speculative (Lal 1998,). He advocated human dignity, liberty, quality, and fraternity through the legal provision. Ambedkar believed that humanism was based on the belief that religion was for the betterment of people and not the other way round. Ambedkar’s social philosophy emphasized on self-respect and human dignity as the core values of just society. He espoused the cause of equality of status and opportunity to every Indian, assuring the dignity of the individual and unity of the nation. He was not merely a learned man, but also an intellectual who sacrificed his life for the dignity and uplift of
the poorest of the poor of the world. His concept of social justice was
derived from ethical morality. The issues of social justice affected
various developmental policies and social welfare programme.
Ambedkar's notion of social justice relies primarily on human dignity.
Influenced by the concept of justice generated from the French
Revolution of 1789. Ambedkar’s perspective on social justice is based
on social democracy which consists of three concept of justice namely
liberty, equality and fraternity. As chapter two argued, these principles
were missing in Hinduism. Ambedkar strongly emphasized that one
must not be content with mere political democracy, it must be a social
democracy too. Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the
base of social democracy, which recognizes liberty, equality and
fraternity as the principles of life. These principles of liberty, equality
and fraternity were not separate items in a trinity. They form a union of
in the sense that to divorce one from the other is to defeat the very
purpose of democracy (Larbeer).

In his “Annihilation of Caste”, Ambedkar argues against the
Gandhian view that religion is for people, rather than vice versa
(Gokhale 2008, 112). Consequently, he did not regard all religions to be
equally perfect. Rather his descriptive and evaluative approach to
religion motivated Ambedkar to critically examine Hinduism as
problematic—given its rootedness in caste system. His criticism of religion was “indirect” (Gokhale 2008, 112). He adopted the criterion of caste equality to examine religions. Besides the norm of equality, Ambedkar also evaluated religions using the criteria of rationality as opposed to superstition; nondogmatism and morality (Gokhale 2008, 114). These criteria were inherent to a humanistic approach which also contributed to dignity. As a result of these criteria, Ambedkar was also motivated to defend Buddhism as embodying these criteria and creating a space for tolerance. It gave dignity to humanity. His interpretation of Buddhism was one that enshrined the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, which were absent in Hinduism (Gokhale “Interpretation of Buddhism”, 144).

One can argue that for Ambedkar the centrality of dignity in Buddhism emerged from its adhering to anatta or the no-soul perspective, as well as, sunyata or the fundamental essenceless of the world. He rejects the karma-rebirth doctrine as contradicting with essencelessness; for it lead to a continuous self, which has an essence such as jiva, atman or purusa (Gokhale, “Interpretation of Buddhism”, 147). Against this the absence of an essence, enabled human beings to define their identities through their own actions. This in turn led to advocating freedom and equality of the person. Freedom can be defined
as a freedom from essence and a freedom to define one’s self. This freedom was equally available to all- without any barriers. As a result, there was a sense of solidarity between persons.

Ambedkar maintains that Dhamma aims at creating a society of free and equal human beings. This can be achieved only when learning is accessible to all (Ambedkar, “Buddha and His Dhamma” 204). He narrates the incident of the Brahmin Lohikka who did not believe in transmitting knowledge to women or ‘shudras’. The Buddha argued with him that this was like a king enjoying all the produce of his land without sharing anything with anyone- it would deprive and endanger all those who depended on him. Those who do not share knowledge similarly violate the principle of interdependence and cause harm to those who depend on them. Hence, learning should in principle and practice be shared with all.

However, according to the Buddha, learning is not just literal regurgitation for it requires applications, extensions and going beyond the sacred books to heavenly boides and governmentality. No human being could have the arrogance of having this degree of omniscience according to the Buddha. For Ambedkar, “If any man, whether he be learned or not, considers himself so great as to despise other men he is like a blind man holding a candle- blind himself, he illumines others”
(Ibid, 207). For the Buddha, knowledge or vidya that is acquired from books alone is not enough; instead it has to be accompanied by Pradnya or insight (208-209). It entails commitment to welfare, steadfastness of thought, will-power and the removal of obstacles in the way of knowledge. But such a mental control alone can be very dangerous according to the Buddha. Like Kant’s hypothetical imperative it can be used for dangerous goals. It has to be accompanied by Sila or virtue: “Pradnya is Vichar Dhamma or thinking aright. Sila is Achar Dhamma, acting aright” (Ambedkar, 210). The virtues preached by the Buddha are those of not killing, not stealing, not lying, not indulging in immoral sexuality and drinking.

Besides Sila or virtue, compassion or Karuna too was very important for the Buddha. Ambedkar narrates an incident where the Buddha himself bathed a man wrought with disease and bad odour- who was ostracised by society- as a proof of his immense compassion. “The purpose of the Tatagatha in coming into the world is to befriend those poor and helpless and unprotected, to nourish those in bodily affliction, whether they be Samanas or men of any other religion- to help the impoverished, the orphan and the aged, and to persuade others so to do” (Ambedkar Buddha and His Dhamma, 212)
Yet such a Karuna becomes possible only when there is also a sense of Maitri: or fellowship and friendship with all living creatures. Maitri is tested through turbulent moments, when a person has to contend with animosity from others. It is a nonresentful and non-reactionary attitude while facing challenges such as insults and offenses. “Loving kindness” or Maitri is ‘freedom of heart’ that absorbs negativity and transforms it into a positive force (Ambedkar “Buddha and His Dhamma”, 2014).

II

Human Dignity

For Ambedkar by following the precepts of Vidya, Pradnya, Karuna and Maitri one could work towards a society without any barriers. For these principles lead to a sense of equality between all human beings so that the four fold system of caste or chaturvarna is abandoned. They teach us that high ideals rather than birth becomes the basis of social unity (219). Without caste, all human beings would be equal and superiority among human beings would disappear. Ambedkar cites the Buddha as saying “Identify yourself with others. As they, so I. As I, so they” (219). This sense of identification removed all social barriers and instilled a sense of
dignity among human beings. On this basis, there “Worth and not birth is the measure of man” (219).

Ambedkar observes that the Buddha concedes to there being differences among people at birth: some are strong, others are weak, some have more intelligence than others and there are class-differences among people (221). However, in the struggle for existence, one cannot permit the rule of inequality and might is right. For this, in Ambedkar’s interpretation of Buddhism would lead to the annihilation of the weak through the survival of those who are most fit. Instead, it is the best- in the sense of being morally upright- who should survive. Such a survival can be achieved through equality. A religion which endorsed causing unhappiness to others as an individual achieved his or her own happiness is not worth pursuing for the Buddha (Ibid). Only when there is equality is there a possibility of dignity for all human beings – in Ambedkar’s interpretation of Buddhism.

It is on the basis of such a Buddhist commitment to human dignity that Ambedkar developed a full-blow doctrine of social and political liberty. However, he had spelled out his sociopolitical conception of rights first, after which he turned to a detailed study of Buddhism and its relationship to human dignity. explained that the Brahminical system denies the right to existential dignity to the Bahujans and relegates them
to a subhuman existence (Satyapal). As a consequence, they are denied three essential rights, viz., their right to identity. All the identities that are attached to the Bahujans are not given by themselves, they were insulting, demeaning identities for the cause of suppression. They were denied the right to choice of occupation and are forced to take up polluting occupations as hereditary occupations. They were forbidden to exercise any right to access or claim over resources of the society in which they live. On the whole, the caste system clamps social oppression, economic exploitation and political suppression which are worse than slavery.

Such a dignity also opened the space for liberty can be categorised into civil liberty and political Liberty. Ambedkar’s describes civil liberty as liberty of movement, liberty of speech and liberty of action. Civil liberties are often formally guaranteed in Indian constitution but ignored in practice which came from Bill of Rights. Civil right is often used to refer to one or more of these liberties or indirectly to the obligation of government to protect dalits from violations of one or more of their civil liberties. These principles are fundamental to just social order and originated in the French revolution. As many thinkers have observed, justice is a foundational concept of social values and holds society together (Raphael). According to Ambedkar, Hindu temples continue to
be spaces for oppression and resistance and remains a major source of caste clashes. Even among the liberals, liberty retains the modified capitalist system of social economic principles (Jatava 209). Everyone has some value contribution in the civic order, in which he lives. He demands that the protection of law, equally and ethically, status be accorded to every member, without any regard to group morally status. Ambedkar believed that the rights are equal and common to all humans. He says that demand equal rights which are the common possession of the entire humanity but due to inhibitions created by the shastras we have been denied this human rights (Larbeer 269).

He further believed that rights could not be protected by law but the social and moral conscience of society. If social conscience recognizes the rights, which law chooses to enact, rights will be safe and secure. But if the fundamental rights are opposed by the community, no law, no parliament, no judiciary can guarantee them in the real sense of the word. The equality before law is in the main foundation of social equality. The political equality refers to the oppressed masses becoming educated and making themselves conscious of their rights, the governing classes needed to be prevented from usurping their productive labour values. Ambedkar suggested a strong political constitution to enforce law and liberty. The political liberty consists in of the rights of the
individual to participate in law governance and politics. He believed that liberty is accompanied with social and economic equality and there must be knowledge (education) made available to all. These liberties are restricted by old Hindu social system but these are the part of the human liberty to crate just social order. Ambedkar defines fraternity as sense of common bond between Indians, which gives unity and solidarity to social life (Jatava 150).

He believed that democracy offers every individual achieve social equality, economic and political justice guaranteed in the preamble of the constitution. Liberty, equality and fraternity should be the only alternative to abolition caste. He argued that, liberty cannot be divorced from equality; equality cannot be divorced from fraternity. With equality, liberty would produce would kill individual initiative. Without fraternity, liberty and equality could not be fulfilled. He believed that the Indian society lacked these principles and advocated a fair constitution as the basis of political democracy that gives equal rights to all. Ambedkar’s emphasized on institutionalising legal and political measures to even out the social distinctions, inequalities and injustices of a caste-ridden society, which ultimately resulted in the provision of benefits to all deprived sections of society. Inspired Buddhist texts such as Ambattha Sutta and Brahmajala Sutta he proposed an organisation of
members irrespective of caste, colour or any discrimination. Thus, Ambedkar had strong views on emancipation of women. He discussed the capability of women to realize spiritual goals and that they should be admitted in the sangha. They were to be admitted as equal to the Bhikkus and their acceptance has to be free from gender bias.

Similar to Marx, Ambedkar too believed that the primary role of the philosopher was to bring about revolutionary change. Marx had started off with philosophy and had adopted the class-consciousness of the proletariat, unlike Ambedkar, in whose case it was his own consciousness, the consciousness of an untouchable built up through concrete experience that had propelled his philosophical search. Marx project was to bring about a revolution of working class, while Ambedkar’s revolution was through conversion. Yet, 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 Babasaheb Ambedkar.

Hence, it is the responsibility of the civil society especially the educated sections to create social and moral consciousness and build a humane society. In an important way, Dr. Ambedkar thus gave expression to an inner need in India for a just social condition; on such basis alone can a nation’s well-being be secured. Though mindful of the
great obstacles to the establishment of democratic arrangement in Indian society, Ambedkar was optimistic about a cohesive society. He exhorted the nation to preserve independence by establishing equality and fraternity in all spheres of life. He believed that the world required to be reconstructed for the public good, common good and universal good of humankind and the new dhamma could lead the way towards a new world.

Ambedkar sensed the inevitability of organising the depressed Classes to agitate against the social wrongs in which they have been experienced age long sufferings. He sought to mobilize Untouchables under one movement for which he established an organisation, called ‘Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha’ in 1924. The motive of the sabha was to ‘Educate, Agitate and Organise’. Initially Ambedkar visited different places in Maharashtra to initiate struggle for future reforms by promoting their education, by organising and making them agitate for their rights. Later he visited different places all over India to fortify the struggle. Presiding the Provincial Depressed Classes Conference, Ambedkar solicited depressed classes to be ready for Social Reforms. Through education, which is an instrument of knowledge, he generated social and revolutionary consciousness among the Untouchables. Under the objectives of Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha in January 1925; a hostel was
inaugurated for the Untouchable educated boys by facilitating clothes, books, and the required stationary. A reading room and library were provided. About political representation for the depressed Classes, Ambedkar held that the Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha was opposed to the principle of nomination. It insisted on the principle of election for the depressed Classes. He advocated it on two grounds. One, it provided political education to the people concerned. Two, ‘Minister-ship is a very important privilege and the depressed Classes cannot afford to forego the same’. He added ‘no great benefit can come to them from the introduction of political reforms unless they can find a place in the Cabinet of the country, from where, they can influence the policy of the Government’. Regarding the system of election he stated that the saba does not wish to ask for communal electorates. In its opinion, it would be sufficient if the depressed Classes are provided with reserved seats in the general constituencies.

Further, he demanded ‘protection through guarantees’ that included that: Firstly, the education of the depressed classes should be recognised as a priority, and that an equitable and just proportion of the total grant for education should be used for the benefit of the depressed Classes. Secondly, the right of the depressed classes to unrestricted recruitment in the army, navy and the police shall be recognized without
any limitations and at no cost. Thirdly, for a period of thirty years the right of the depressed classes for priority in the matter of recruitments to all posts, gazetted as well as non-gazetted, in all civil services shall be recognised. Fourthly, the right of the Depressed Classes to the appointment of a Special Inspector of Police from amongst themselves for every district shall be recognised. Fifthly, the right of the depressed classes to effective representation on the local bodies shall be recognised by the provincial government. Sixthly, the right of the depressed classes to appeal to the Government of India. In case of violation of rights by the provincial governments, the Government of India shall be given the powers to compel the Provincial Governments to conform to the law in the matter. Ambedkar’s legislative philosophy of human dignity prescribed that the depressed classes should enlarge adequate political power for securing their welfare. He placed the following proposal for incorporation in the electoral law that:

- Right to adequate representation in the Legislatures of the country both at central and provincial levels.
- Right to elect their own men as their representatives by adult suffrage and by separate electorates for the first ten years and thereafter by joint electorates and reserved seats, it being understood, that joint electorates shall not be forced upon the
Depressed Classes against their will unless it is accompanied by adult suffrage.

He further demanded weightage over the population ratio of representation for the depressed Classes of Bombay and Madras, irrespective of the extent of representation allowed to other minorities in the other provinces. Ambedkar defended the moral right of the depressed Classes to be represented in the cabinet and the right to have an opportunity of framing the policy of the government. It was an attempt to secure the representation of the Depressed Classes in the cabinet under the 1935 Act. He proposed this as he believed that majoritarianism may ignore the needs of underprivileged and neglect their interests. It was a way of restoring power in the hands of the underprivileged. He proposed for each province and for India, that it should be the duty of and obligation of the legislature and the executive or any other authority established by law to make adequate provision for education, sanitation, recruitment in public services and other matters of social and political advancement of the depressed classes and to do nothing that will prejudicially affect them. Ambedkar opposed special provisions based on religious communalism. He was totally opposed to the recognition of communal representation in the executive of the country. He was in favour of political diarchy rather than communal diarchy and he
considered the possibility of a government in political diarchy based on principle of liberty and equality. This he believed should be fundamental spirit of the constitution of the country.

From the above deliberation it is clear that the caste is a close system while class can be an open system. Education can lead an individual to move from caste to class, that is from close system to open system. In caste system, an individual is confined only to his or her traditional occupation. So, there is a little scope to grow. But in class, as it is open, an individual can grow as per his or her capability. Hence, Ambedkar suggested what Christopher Queen has characterized as a heretical shift from caste Hinduism to Buddhism in the modern spirit of the ‘universalization of heresy’ (1974, 99). He severed links with absolute and inegalitarian traditions to affirm a truly modern point of view (119). For this he believed that none of the religions of India or the West could meet with the demand of the downtrodden masses of humanity (120).

And only education can bring this change. Ambedkar had also given lot of emphasis on education as a means of change. His motto was, “Educate, Organize and Agitate”. Here he had given prime importance to education. He believed that the backward classes could only be emancipated through education education and their struggle is for access
to the same. Without education ones existence is not safe He suffered a lot due to this caste system. Thus, the chapter attempts to deal with the key concepts as human dignity which is a key concern in any discussion of human rights. Ambedkar’s philosophy was that self-respect and human dignity were of paramount importance in a free republic. Culture in Buddhism implies "regular observance of the Five Precepts, positively and negatively, we gradually reduce our greed and hatred. The issues of social justice is affected various developmental policy as well as whole development of social welfare programme. Ambedkar’s perspective of social justice is based on social democracy which consists of three concept of justice namely liberty, equality and fraternity. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism brought great revolutionary social change to remove the evils non-morality from the society of inequality and to preserve human dignity in the light of neo-Buddhism.