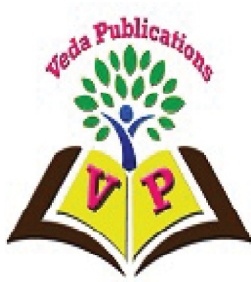




AMBEDKAR'S DALIT THEOLOGY AND RELIGION

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ABSTRACT

Ambedkar was one of the eminent theologians who tried to show the real path of humanity. His interpretations on religion and Dalit liberation are two significant forms which help us to learn a common ideal value system and morality. It would promote justice and social welfare, the cultural transformation of the mind, mental freedom and psychological empowerment of the Dalits.

The other extreme of religion is purely secular. To locate liberation, it drains out from us the sap of spiritual power, moral strength, religious motive forces, and the collective wisdom of the religio-cultural traditions from the ages. The social concern and liberative struggle for justice can be found as tangible signs and sacraments of the kingdom of righteousness from the replacement of religious fundamentalism and communajism. This paper tries to focus on such issues related to Indian religions which unleash the revolutionary potential in their religious traditions through liberative hermeneutics done by the Dalits and the oppressed who are the subjects and agents of liberative theologies. The ultimate vision and goal of Ambedkar's liberative struggle is the kingdom of righteousness which is an important purpose of *Saddhamma*. This is the focal theme of discussion.



Ambedkar's theology is an attempt to engage with a philosophical discussion of liberative perspectives of Dalits in religion. It is necessary that we entertain a philosophical inquiry to enable a theoretical platform for an ongoing reflection of Ambedkar's social and religious contributions. As against the degrading social order of casteism, such inquiry would facilitate an alternative philosophical basis for a process of reconstruction of an interrelated community life on the foundations of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

The relation between philosophy, theology and religion is an important aspect in recent modern thoughts. It is mainly due to the considerable differences of opinions and interrelationships. Positivism considers philosophy as an advanced discipline beyond both religion and theology. The proponents of logical positivism consider unverifiable propositions as meaningless, which include both religion and theology. *Barthian theology* claims to be quite independent of philosophy. Religion, theology, philosophy and philosophy of religion are intimately and dialectically related. The intimate relation between these fields lies mainly on the idea that these are human activities and human ways of acting in existence. The analysis of how human activities are related is basically concerned with the structure of these disciplines, not with the inner content of any field.

Since all interpretation of the meaning of reality as a human activity is based on certain commitments, theology is also firmly rooted in this religious commitment. However theology cannot be considered as a mere religious commitment, rather it is a mode of reflection of commitment. "Theology is an interpretation of the meaning of the power of reality" (Durfeel92). It is a theoretical analysis of the power of reality to which We have given our religious response. The phrase, '*power of reality*' means the power or energy which makes us to accept that these are something real. Why did we believe that there is something called real, rather than nothing? Thus, it can be seen that theology is an analysis of the existential relationship between the power of reality and the self. And this analysis on reality can be done

only on the basis of a particular commitment. That is the dialectical relation between religion and theology.

Apart from the concerns of these fields, philosophy is an attempt to analyze the structure of the given real being. It is an interpretation of reality. The development of rational analysis on reality can be done only by commitment as an existing individual. This commitment is due to the power of reality. In theology, we analyze the nature of power of reality. In philosophy, we analyze the structure and nature of the real, which has been brought forth by the power of reality. It is quite obvious that philosophy, like theology is carried on the basis of religious commitment. At this juncture, the dialectical relation between religion, philosophy and theology is evident. One's philosophical analysis may influence one's commitment and that will affect one's philosophy. Moreover, there is a theological doctrine presupposed by every philosophical analysis and position implied in every theological position.

Theology and philosophy by themselves are but fragmentations of a total worldview. This worldview will be completed when the relationship between these two fields are developed. And this is the task of the philosophy of religion. Specifically the task of philosophy of religion is to elaborate the relationship of philosophical analysis of the real and the theological analysis of power of the real and the relationship between philosophy and theology of the religious commitment which is their foundation.

PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

The philosophy of religion starts from the recognition that in the life of mankind there is something called religion. Religion should not be analyzed and understood solely on the content of religion. Primarily religion should be analyzed as a form of expression. That means primary concern of the philosophy of religion is not the ideas and beliefs of religions. The practical and empirical aspects of religion and its objective implications are the primary concern of philosophy of religion. Philosophy considers religion as an ultimate expression of the notion of Reality. That is, analyzing 'ultimate' in relation to empirical reality of religion. Therefore, it seems that

the only way for any advancement towards a modern philosophy of religion is to turn as freely as possible from initial metaphysical prejudice to religion as actually found.

“Ambedkar’s religious philosophy is the best ideology in Indian philosophy. Philosophy of religion should not only be descriptive but also critical, which many protagonists of religion forget” (Dananjay 490). The experts say that Phenomenology of Religion, Sociology of Religion and even in the Comparative Religion and History of Religions do not go beyond the description of religion. May be it is due to their objectives and methodology. But the philosophers and theologians of religion have no excuse for they often turn apologists rather than critical thinkers. The insistence of Ambedkar that Religion is basically a social phenomenon and that human may not need a religion if they were to exist individually. Many religious leaders and priests, who overemphasize only the individual salvation of soul, *Mukti* and *Nirvana* are only exploiting religion for their interests. “Any religion that fails to emphasize the social dimension, the social responsibility and the need of social commitment, is a false religion” (Ambedkar 226). According to Ambedkar’s analysis of religion, “every religion contains primarily a system of ideal scheme and means to attain the same. Every religion proposes an ideal scheme to its followers as the good to be achieved and as the sacred goal, and divine ultimate aim in life” (Ambedkar 226). Besides this value system, religions also suggest a set of means to reach the ideal and goal. All religions may not stress all values equally and some may even neglect essential values. Even if some religions were to emphasize the same ideals, the means that they offer differs. This method of studying and analyzing religions can also be easily extended to the ideologies such as Marxism or Gandhism as Ambedkar himself did.

AMBEDKAR’S VISION FOR A NEW SOCIETY

The ultimate vision and goal of Ambedkar’s liberative struggle is the kingdom of righteousness which, according to him, “The important purpose of *Saddharma*, which is the kingdom of righteousness lies on earth and to be reached by man by righteous conduct” (201). The kingdom of righteousness consists

of love, peace and justice for all. It is the total and integral liberation of all, of every human being, every community and every nation on earth. Though Ambedkar struggled all his life to liberate his own community which was the worst affected of all others, he did support the cause of other depressed castes, backward classes, minorities and especially the rights of women. The liberation of the Dalits was not an end in itself nor does it fulfill the ultimate goal of establishing the kingdom of righteousness which entails the liberation of all people.

The ideal of the kingdom of righteousness is realized in practice in a new society that is just and egalitarian, that is based on the principle of liberty, equality, and fraternity. The blue print for the new society of Ambedkar’s dream was drawn out by him in the preamble of India’s Constitution. All the people of India are part of ideal society. The new ideal society has only importance for true ideology not for noble birth. “In the ideal society, there is no importance of caste and inequality, superiority, and inferiority; all are equal” (Ambedkar 219). The new society is socialistic, democratic, and has an egalitarian structure. It is free from every form of exploitation, dictatorship, domination and the oppression of caste, gender, ethnic nation and the culture. The society is just like where even the weakest group receives recognition, equal respect, dignity and identity, and is bequeathed with special affirmation and privileges to promote itself. *Dharma* is morality where love, justice and peace reign. It is “the peace which is based on justice and not the peace of a grave yard.

RELIGION FOR DALIT EMANCIPATION

Religion is not an end in itself. It is meant for the preservation of life and human welfare. Hence, religion is not the one that has the final say, it is not infallible, absolute, inflexible nor permanent. Quoting Ambedkar, Vasant Moon says that “religion is for humans and not humans for religion. For him, ‘man and morality must be the centre of religion’ (442). Humanist to the core, Ambedkar was ready to throw away any religion or religious practice, however, ancient and sanctified that does not promote human welfare and the liberation of the Dalits and the weak. “Any religion, that enslaves the minds of the people

by fear or force, curtailing their liberation and freedom, that denies justice, equality and democracy, that hinders universal fraternity, it is not determined as religion at all (Moon 443). Such religious practices, ceremonies and customs are to be rejected, and such doctrines are to be corrected. Even when a single person or small group is oppressed by a religion, a religious person or a religious class that religion is in need of an urgent reform. Domination of the clergy, exploitation of people in the name of devotions, calcification, superstitious and magical ceremonies, outmoded and irrelevant practices, over spiritualization of religious doctrines, and deification of religious figures and saints, distort religion. We need religion for the liberation of humanity not the religion that does not liberate humanity or fuel liberation.

DALIT LIBERATIVE STRUGGLE

Ambedkar's theology is empirical and it is based on experience. He was a victim of exploitation and caste prejudice. He was denied a place to stay, water to drink, vehicle to travel in just because he was born in an untouchable community. Though a scholar of repute abroad, he had to bear the insults in his home state just because he was a Dalit. He, like Moses, forsaking the positions that could have been his, opted to lead his people into the land of freedom. Unto the last, he struggled for this mission. His philosophy was therefore pathos-praxis based. His commitment to the liberation of Dalits prompted his critical reflection, motivated and inspired all his studies and writings. He was not an armchair philosopher. Praxis reflection was his methodology. Ambedkar's Dalit struggle was completely the liberative hermeneutical circle. Realizing inhumanity and ungodliness of the whole system, he comes to suspect the scriptures that have sanctified, legitimized and sanctioned such a diabolical tyranny. This exegetical suspicion leads to the reinterpretation of scriptures and religion itself. Leaving the job of reinterpreting the Hindu scriptures to Hindus, he takes up the reinterpretation of Buddhism, the ancient religion of the Dalits.

AMBEDKAR AND DALIT THEOLOGY

Commendable aspects of Ambedkarian theology deserve special mention and praise. The fact that Ambedkar undertook philosophical and theological work in spite of his busy schedule as an activist, politician, statesman and member of various committees, all of which demanded a lot of responsibility, attention and labour, itself. It is a great achievement on his part. Due to his hectic activity he was unable to produce a systematic philosophical/theological treatise. Ambedkar's theological approach was analytical and synthetic as well. His writings reveal his inquisitive mind that would not just get satisfied with simplistic understanding, but would reach to the heart of the matter. He poses one question after another that takes him deeper, and deeper. "Ambedkar comes up with the real causes and reasons for the matter in discussion. At the same time his theology exhibits many points of synthesis. Steering clear of the existing "isms", ideologies and schools of thought and assimilating the best from them, Ambedkar offers an original synthesis that follows the Buddhist *middle path*" (Jatava 39-42).

As already mentioned, there is a synthesis of the enlightenment of the East and the West in Ambedkar's thought. Similarly, in his theology we find salient features of American Liberalism, Russian Socialism, Individualism, Collectivism, Materialism, Spiritualism, Scientific Positivism and Religious Wisdom that blend together as a synthesis. His liberative praxis is also uniquely combined in its strategy both the Gandhian *satyagraha* and Marxian class struggle. "The social analysis of Ambedkar was again a blend of the economic analysis including dialectical historical materialism, and the cultural analysis of religion, culture and social institution of caste" (Mathew 207-226). His Dalit revolution includes both the Cultural Revolution and Social Revolution.

Ambedkar's theology is essentially forever; it is reflected in his writings. His aim and dream was to build up the kingdom of righteousness, *Dhamma Raj* by perfecting the social order gradually. To begin with, in order to realize socio-religious reform for equality, national independence, democratic constitutional forms of government, and state socialism are to be

realized. "The transformation of the social relationships and attitudes, based on the new value system of liberty, equality and fraternity, is the foundation of the new just egalitarian society. Only then humane divine state of love and peace can rein the universe, with blessedness and happiness for all creatures, the humans and the nature" (Ambedkar 235-236). With the eschatological spirit, the Ambedkarites are continuing spiritual struggle to establish the *Dhamma Raj*.

CONCLUSION

Ambedkar's theology is very much contextual and cultural. He would not accept the wholesale imported Marxian theory that does not take into account caste and religion which are very powerful and influential factors in the Indian context and culture. Ambedkar also rejected Islam and Christianity as they are foreign religions associated with the anti-national and imperialistic countries. He felt that adoption of Christianity by the Dalits would weaken the national independence movement. The return of Buddhism gave not only identity and enlightenment to the Dalits, also revived the Dalit Dravidian, Non-Aryan and Non-Brahminic "Indie" culture, whose ancient religion was Buddhism. It has exploded the myth of Hindus who equate Indian culture with Hindu culture and India with Hindustan.

Another striking feature of Ambedkar's theology is *non-dogmatism* and *provisionalism*. Ambedkar strives hard to convince us to be rational and scientific, and not to believe anything on the word of someone else, because it is claimed to be a divine revelation. He made it clear to his people that he does not want blind followers, and that nothing of what he has written is perennial, infallible and dogmatic. Instead, he calls attention many times to the Buddhist principle of impermanence and constant change. We also find his theological approach universalistic. It wishes the welfare of all people. It wants the end of class and caste struggle, so that all can live in peace and prosperity.

Ambedkar yearned for the common good and envisioned a society based on liberty, equality and fraternity of all people. He was never satisfied with

material world and often he reminded his people of the spiritual salvation, mental enlightenment, cultural transformation, social status, unity, love and peace, which are essential for happy and holy life.

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