

Vol. 8, Issue-II (April 2017)

ISSN: 0976-8165

# THE CRITERION

*An International Journal in English*

Bi-monthly, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access eJournal



UGC Approved Journal [Arts and Humanities, Sr. No. 40]

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

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## **Renaissance of Buddhism, Ambedkar and Dalit Emancipation in India**

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**Article History:** Submitted-29/03/2017, Revised-14/04/2017, Accepted-19/04/2017, Published-30/04/2017.

### **Abstract:**

Impressed and influenced by the egalitarian principles of Buddhism Babasaheb Ambedkar chose to shun Hinduism. Like Ambedkar, the Buddha was born in India of Hindu parents and raised as a Hindu. Disillusioned by the pain, pathos and ills of society he severed his links with the society and religion of his birth forming and propagating a religion which was actually a new way of life altogether. It was non-discriminatory and helped the practitioners accept the harsh reality they encountered within the dogmatic moralising of Hindu caste system. The practitioners of Buddhism, called Shramans were recluses, who led a casteless, classless and austere life within and in the fringes of society. Babasaheb Ambedkar, the father of Dalit Movement in India, envisioned a similar life for the Dalit. He envisioned Dalit emancipation through community and participation made possible only through self knowledge and induction into Sangha or community thereby, to build a formidable post-Hindu Dalit Buddhist Sangha to face challenges towards Dalit empowerment. Ambedkar was instrumental in the Renaissance of Buddhism which would show the Dalit a path to regain their human dignity. This paper proposes a socio-historical research to look into Babasaheb Ambedkar's endeavour, in the early twentieth century, to revive the Sangha Doctrine of Buddhism, whereby, a vision of Dalit emancipation could be ensured. As cases in point I have explored the autobiographies of Om Prakash Valmiki, Saran Kumar Limbale and Bama that showcase the dehumanized conditions of the Dalit.

**Keywords: Buddhism, Dalit, Ambedkar, Emancipation, Human dignity**

The practice of Hinduism based itself on the division of labour. The social hierarchy was formed according to the work each individual was assigned. The duty assigned gradually became a family profession leading to the formation of guilds which later took on the nomenclature of caste. In the mainstream of Hindu life, according to the records of the agents of history, a class of people assigned with the duty of serving others were relegated to the margins and called shudras. They were rendered untouchable. The Untouchables or Dalit are a marginalized class victimised by the hegemonic Brahministic 'ideology of caste.' This Hindu upper caste ideology was used as an instrument to dehumanize, oppress, exploit and dominate the Dalit in India. Oppression, dominance and hegemony are constituents of an ideology through which the dominant class is able to create a faction in mainstream society and thereby able to reproduce its class domination and control over weaker classes of society.

Casteism, a permanently organized force of institutionalized inequality enforced by the Brahminical society, has seen resistance and protest at all times in history. But the voices silenced and erased by hegemonic aesthetic forums have attempted to rise aesthetically through art and literature during the Bhakti Movement and thereafter. Siva Nagaiah Bolleddu notes in his book *Writing the Self* (2015) that the first radical Dalit protest movement in India was led by Jotirao Phule (1827-1890) in the nineteenth century. Phule was influenced and inspired by the egalitarian philosophy of the Buddha and Kabir and ‘struggled to rebuild the society on the matrix of ‘equality,’ ‘justice’ and ‘reason’’. . . Phule believed that education was the source of emancipation and empowerment. . . Phule’s *Gulamgiri* (1873) was a revolutionary deconstruction of the Brahminical culture’ (11). After Phule, B.R. Ambedkar’s role in Dalit emancipation is indisputable. He too realised that the objectives of Brahminical sacred books were designed to give priority to graded inequality between different castes. Like Phule, after being a victim of caste discrimination, he too was influenced by the Buddhist philosophy of dignity and equality of human beings achieved through communion. This paper proposes to look at the Brahminical oppression of Dalits and Babasaheb Ambedkar’s endeavour, in the early twentieth century, to revive the Sangha Doctrine of Buddhism, whereby, a vision of Dalit emancipation could be ensured through negotiating the political and religious identity towards a progressive modernity. As cases in point the paper explores the autobiographies of Om Prakash Valmiki, Saran Kumar Limbale and Bama, respectively, which showcase the dehumanized conditions of the Dalit.

Ambedkar’s fight for Dalit dignity and identity took the shape of a politico-religious movement called the neo-Buddhism or Ambedkarite Buddhism. Although, the Buddha was born in India of Hindu parents and raised as an upper caste Hindu. Disillusioned by the pain, pathos and ills of society he severed his links with the society and religion of his birth forming and propagating a new way of life altogether, which was non-discriminatory and doctrinated principles of life, later known as Buddhism. This would help the practitioners to accept the harsh reality they encountered within the dogmatic moralising of Hindu caste system. The practitioners or *Shramans* were recluses, who led a casteless, classless and austere life within and in the fringes of society. The Hindus, while accepting Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu, did not take cognizance of the *Vikshus/Shramans* who were not necessarily from the higher castes of Hindu society. Buddhism never aimed at reforming the Hindu caste system; rather it had a completely different philosophy of egalitarianism and penance. What Babasaheb Ambedkar, the father of Dalit Movement in India, envisioned for the Dalit was emancipation through community and participation. It was felt that emancipation and participation could be possible only through self knowledge and induction into *Sangha* or community. Ambedkar wanted Dalit intellectuals to use the community strength and property to build a formidable post-Hindu Buddhist *Sangha* to face challenges towards Dalit empowerment. This is how Ambedkar envisioned the Renaissance of Buddhism which would show the Dalit a path to regain their human dignity.

For the present purpose this paper looks into the dehumanized and oppressed lives of the lower caste as depicted in the Autobiographies of Omprakash Valmiki, Saran Kumar Limbale, and Bama, *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life* (1998), *The Outcaste* (2004) and *Karukku*

(2012), respectively. The writers in context are from three different parts of India revealing similar tales of atrocity against humanity. Valmiki was born in a Chuhra community in Uttar Pradesh. In *Joothan* we read accounts of the atrocities faced on a daily basis by the lower caste. The upper caste Tagas exploited the Chuhras, making them work for them without any return and the Chuhras were not even expected or allowed to ask for payment for the labour done. Valmiki says, “We would often have to work without pay. Nobody dared to refuse this unpaid work for which we got neither money nor grain. Instead, we got sworn at and abused”(2). As Bolleddu notes, the practice of untouchability was so rampant then ‘that while it was acceptable to touch dogs and cats or cows and buffaloes, but not a Chuhra. The Chuhras were not seen as human. Their utility lasted until the work was done’ (58). They were exploited and dehumanized. Valmiki goes on to give more details of the dehumanising acts of discrimination of the upper castes against them. He says that the even the teachers did not stop at humiliating him. In one incident, when he questioned a teacher about the silence in the epics about the Dalits, the teacher flew into a rage and screamed, “Darkest Kaliyuga has descended upon us so that an untouchable is daring to talk back’(23). In fact the teacher thrashed him mercilessly and said, “Chuhre, you dare compare yourself with Dronacharya... Here, take this, I will write an epic on your body” (23).

*The Outcaste* is the autobiography of Sharan Kumar Limbale. It corroborates the tale of humiliation, agony and hunger. Limbale was born into the Mahar community of Maharashtra and is one of the most renowned Dalit writers today. He bears the stigma of illegitimacy and in his autobiography narrates his most shocking experience as an illegitimate child born of a Mahar mother and an upper caste Lingayet father, who, though he enjoys sex with Limbale’s mother, refuses to acknowledge that Limbale is his son. He painfully recounts his confusion as a Dalit illegitimate child, when, one day the teacher decided to enrol him at school and asked him his father’s name. He writes, “I did not know my father’s name. Strange that I too could have a father!”(45). He worries about his mother, Masamai, who has been mortgaging herself to one owner after another and being used as a commodity suffering the tyranny of sex. Limbale’s humiliation multiplies when the Sarpanch refuses to sign his application form. In agony he writes, “I too was a human being. What else did I have except a human body? But a man is recognized in this world by his religion, caste, or his father. I had neither a father’s name, nor any religion, nor a caste. I had no inherited identity at all.”(59) The anger of exclusion burns through the discourse in *The Outcaste*. Limbale writes, “ I was afraid of my caste because I couldn’t claim my father’s caste and religion. In a sense I was not a Mahar, because high-caste blood ran in my body. Could I drain this blood out of my body? My own body nauseated me. The agony I lived through is my own as much that of my village.” (82) Questions perplex him: “How is a person born with his caste? How does he become untouchable as soon as he is born? From his feet Lord Brahma gave birth to a vast low-caste community. Since then this community has been living as untouchables. To appease their hunger they steal, beg, fetch dead animals, and eat them. What is wrong if one who has been deprived of bread for thousands of years, steals bread just once? If one had enough why would one steal? Why would one suffer at the hands of the police?” (82-83)

Hunger is depicted as another predominant theme in *The Outcaste*. Limbale narrates a dehumanizing incident at school. After a picnic the teacher asked the upper caste students to collect the leftovers and give it to the Dalit students. The upper caste students laughed and joked but the Mahar children had their eyes on the bundle of leftovers. Limbale writes, “Mallya carried a bundle of bhakari on his head and we, the Mahar boys, followed him excitedly like hungry vultures... Our stomachs were as greedy as a beggar’s sack.” (3) Hunger, humiliation and denial of dignity and education form the saga of Dalit existence. Bama’s autobiography *Karukku* also re-states or corroborates the same theme. Bama was born in Tamil Nadu into a Dalit family who had converted to Christianity. In *Karukku* she has exposed the discrimination and dehumanization that the Dalits were subjected to by the Christian Church.

Christianity operates upon the principles of love, compassion, sacrifice, humanity and equality. But the Dalit who had converted to Christianity in India saw a different face of this religion altogether. Bama writes, “they [people in the convent] intimidated me by talking of ‘obedience’ and ‘faith’. They insisted I could go only where I was sent, I must only do as I was told. They exhorted me to see with the eyes of faith. All I could see was their authority flying high like a flag. People like me were to be sacrificed in order to maintain it.”(114) People belonging to lower castes were demeaned and looked down upon. Bama had to camouflage her identity for the fear of being humiliated and ostracised. She would shrink into herself as she did not have the courage to tell her peers that she was Dalit. She knew that they would then stop talking to her. In fact she was afraid of how they might behave towards her. She was mortified by the hypocrisy of the Christian Priests and notes some of the things they said about Dalit:

How can we allow these people to come into our houses? In any case, even if we were to allow them, they would not enter our homes. They themselves know their place.’

‘There is nothing we can do for these creatures. We shouldn’t do anything for them. Because to do so would be like helping cobras.’

Even if we were to do something for them, they will never make progress.’  
115.

Shocked at this casteist attitude of the Christian Priests Bama wonders, “What service can people with such tainted minds render?” (115)

The angst of the Dalit protagonist is expressed through her experience of pain. Pain becomes an inciting and unifying factor that binds the community together in a fight against caste discrimination and serves to reaffirm and strengthen the link between the individual and the larger Dalit community. Sarah Beth in one of her research papers observes the need of the Dalit to write their autobiographies. She says that it is “a form of political assertion ... giving Dalit entrance into a public space through identity based narrative authority” (9). While dominant Indian society narrates the Dalit as ‘inferior’ and ‘polluted,’ the Dalit writers wield narrative authority to describe their own life and the life of their community to re-write

selfhood. Critics like M. K. Naik (*An Indian Out-caste* 1951) and Bolleddu (*Writing the Self* 2015) have cited the political agenda of Raja Ram Mohan Ray and Gandhi who have merely redefined Hinduism with a modern face and subtly reinforced caste hegemony by expressing in their work that caste plays a kernel role in Indian society, yet underplaying the actual experience of the Dalit in cultural encounters. Bolleddu calls Gandhi and Nehru socially and politically conscious figures that have trivialised caste and have overlooked it. He argues that “Gandhi has romanticised his upper caste prestige and prejudice. He foregrounded his caste history.... Apart from his caste dominance he has revived the Hinduism and has strongly established the modern paradigm of Hindu nationalism through his political activities”. (22) He further argues that “Gandhi has vehemently opposed and contorted Dalits’ interests”. (22) He cites portions from Gandhi’s Autobiography, *My Experiments with Truth* (1927) and tries to project that Gandhi was against religious conversions that the Dalit resorted to by way of social emancipation.

The Dalit writers and activists reject Gandhian philosophy and accept Dr B. R. Ambedkar as their guiding spirit. Nimbalkar, a contemporary Dalit writer, talks about Ambedkar’s philosophy which, he claims, “contained a graph of progress of the people at the grass roots of the society”(18). Ambedkar believed that Gautama Buddha revolted against the unjust class structure of the Hindus and thus, revitalised Dalit community and turned it towards self-respect. Valmiki, Limbale and Bama, the three writers, whose autobiographies have been cited in this article, from across genders and geographical divides of India, are representative of the Dalit who, irrespective of their religious allegiance, suffer the predicament of discrimination similar to that suffered by the Buddha himself. The Buddhist text, Jataka<sup>1</sup>, bears testimony to this. It is replete with tales of previous births of Buddha where he is an untouchable. We can take as cases in point the Matanga Jataka and Chitta Sambhuta Jataka. Raja Sekhar Vundru in his article ‘Buddha as Untouchable’ notes that:

In Matanga Jataka, Lord Buddha takes birth as a Chandala’s son, Matanga. One day, Matanga goes to Benaras, and Dittha-Mangalika, daughter of a Benaras merchant, upon seeing him cries hoarse that a Chandala has entered Benaras. The people around beat Matanga till he becomes senseless.

After he regains consciousness, Matanga realises that people beat him up for no reason because of the act of the Dittha-Mangalika, and resolves that he will not budge till he gets her. He lay at the door of her father’s house for seven days, his resolve immutable. On the seventh day, the merchant brings out the girl and hands her over to Matanga... In another Jataka, Chitta Sambhuta Jataka, the great being, born as an untouchable named Chitta goes with his cousin Sambutha to Takshashila, by camouflaging their caste to learn. But in an incident, the two men by mistake start speaking in a dialect of untouchables. The Brahmins get to know about this and beat both of them. They both turn into ascetics. [CounterCurrent.org](http://CounterCurrent.org)

The Jataka tales point towards the fact that the only way to counter discrimination is determination and enlightenment that one could achieve through education and communion.

It is pertinent here to discuss Ambedkar, who was instrumental in the rebirth or the renaissance of Buddhism in 20<sup>th</sup> century India, which has been called the neo-Buddhism of Ambedkar. Himself, a Mahar, an Untouchable, born in Mhow in Maharashtra, Ambedkar had the rare opportunity and access to education because his father worked in the British Army. In spite of material wealth and educational opportunities Ambedkar had to struggle constantly against the social stigma of untouchability. Dhananjay Keer, one of Ambedkar's biographers tells of the scars of untouchability that Ambedkar bore since childhood such as being forbidden to read Sanskrit or sit in the same classroom as upper caste students.(26-47) The anger resultant from the humiliation gave Ambedkar the impetus to excel in his studies and finally, shun Hinduism for Buddhism. He was vastly influenced by Jotirao Phule and Maharishi Vitthal Ramji Shinde. Shinde portrayed Buddhism as a positive humanitarian philosophy that could be an alternative to Hinduism which would formulate an ideal progressive social ideology. Thus influenced, Ambedkar saw in the *Sangha* doctrine of Buddhism the route to emancipation of the Dalit through communion and participation.

In the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE the Buddha founded his *Sangha* in Northern India. The *Sangha*, as explained by Sunanda Putuwar in her Doctoral Dissertation, was a union of wandering monks who had forsaken worldly life for the sake of spiritual liberation. Buddha preached with the intention of helping them overcome their sufferings (dukkha) and to help them break the cycle of birth and death (samsara) in order to attain ultimate liberation through enlightenment. While Hinduism separates people into castes, Buddhism does not accept the caste system. Here people from all classes and castes live and operate equally with one another in and out of the *Sangha*. Because of the moral strength and practical reason it embodies *Sangha* can be called the ideal society. (47-56) Eva-Maria Hardtmann observes that Ambedkar had already made his stand clear regarding his conversion and joining this ideal society in an inflaming speech in 1935:

Because we have the misfortune of calling ourselves Hindus, we are treated thus. If we were members of another Faith, none would dare to treat us so. Choose any religion which gives you equality of status and treatment. We shall repair our mistake now. I had the misfortune of being born with the stigma of an Untouchable. However, it is not my fault; but I will not die a Hindu, for this is in my power. (qtd. In Hardtmann 91)

Disillusioned with Hinduism and after having studied religions like Islam, Christianity and Buddhism, Ambedkar finally decided that Buddhism would give the Dalit dignity as human beings and help in their emancipation and social mobility. Amrit Dhillon comments in his article "Untouchables put Faith in Buddhism", that the Dalit embraced Buddhism because of its classlessness and egalitarianism. He says, "the drawback of Islam and Christianity in India is that these two faiths have, over time, also absorbed elements of the caste system. (South China Morning Post. 4 Nov. 2001)

It is interesting to note that 'Ambedkar did not subscribe to any specific Buddhist school but gave his own interpretation of Buddhism, which has become known as



Ambedkarite Buddhism.’(93) His Buddhism was utilitarian and Marxist in nature and accommodative at the same time. “Ambedkar found Buddhism to be too unworldly, and his own interpretation of Buddhism was, according to Omvedt, ‘meant for a community of super-exploited men and women seeking their place in a new millennium.’”(qtd. In Hardtmann 94) Karl Marx’s view that ‘(T)he function of philosophy is to reconstruct the world and not to waste its time in explaining the origin of the world’(95) appealed to Ambedkar. While criticising both communism and religion he held that Buddhist *Dhamma* was richer and more appropriate to the cause of the Dalit as its purpose was to restructure the world. Ambedkarite Buddhism envisioned emancipation and social well being of the Dalit through enlightenment. Thus, the egalitarian Ambedkarite Buddhism brought about the renaissance of Buddhism in 20<sup>th</sup> century India. After Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism in 1956 masses of Dalit converted to Buddhism to shed the stigma of untouchability. According to Eleanor Zelliot altogether in India the number of Buddhists rose from 180,823 in 1951 census to 3,250, 227 in 1961.(126). There have been more conversions since, for example, thousands have converted in 2001, in New Delhi (China Morning Post. 4 Nov 2001:8)

The egalitarian doctrine of Buddhism encouraged the Dalit to protest against their oppressed status and many protest forums were created to address their problems, like the Dalit Panther Party, Dalit Shosit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti(D-S4) etc. They sought upliftment through education and created a literature of their own expressing their angst. The autobiographies of Valmiki and Limbale, both beneficiaries of Ambedkarianism, bear testimony to the fact that emancipation can happen through education and egalitarianism. In more recent times the Dalit organizational structure has shown its flexibility, diversity and ability to change constantly. Hardtmann observes that Dalit activism now oscillating between place politics and cyberpolitics, i.e., between political activism and the internet. “It seems that transnational social movements are more able than ever before to challenge the process of neoliberal economic globalization with the help of new ICTs and in particular the internet.” (238)

The Renaissance of Buddhism brought about by Ambedkar has vastly benefitted the Dalit. In fact, Baburao Bagul , a novelist has “stated that Dalit Literature began with the Buddhist conversion, that only that release from the psychological imprisonment of untouchability freed the poet and the writer, to create.”(Paswan 33) Enlightened by education, a literature of their own, and dynamic global networking they have been able to deconstruct their identity as untouchable and impure. The Dalit identity has been reconstructed through performativity in the recent times. Hardtmann has rightly observed that they ‘uphold their unique identities and contribute to the global justice movement with their own specific historical experiences.’(239)

## Notes.

<sup>1</sup>Jataka: Stories of the various reincarnations and rebirths of the Buddha.



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