
What is Sadhamma?

Dr. Ambedkar's View on the notion of Religion

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Abstract

Religion is unstoppable force in human consciousness. History of religions witnesses the dual experience in humanity. Religion in its positive spirit can act as the force of liberation and it may act the force of oppression. The philosophy of religion at one time generally understood to mean religious philosophizing in the sense of the philosophical defense of religious conventions and the beliefs that attached to it. This can also proceed without questioning and introspections and thus can be merely a matter of following without querying. Mainly the religions are programmed to demonstrate rationally for the existence of God or of supernatural power that controls everything in the universe, including human action. In this way it prepares for the claim of revelation. In this connection religion can also sanction the class that is close to such revelation and such class claims the privileged position over common people. Religion in this sense does not them remain a body of teaching or the path to follow with an inquiry but becomes a doctrine that needs to be followed without investigation.

This paper tries to look into the fundamental concerns that Dr. B. R. Ambedkar insightfully addresses in the process of human history to understand the notion of religion.

Key Words:

The Buddha, Dhamma, Sadhamma, Adhamma, Ambedkar, view (ditthi), mind.

Introduction:

Religion is unstoppable force in human consciousness. The statement is not of a form but the human history witnessed in facts over a period of thousands of years. The religious force did guide not merely directed the human behaviors in terms of belief but deeply influenced the socio-cultural patterns, economy, state governance and politics. Dr Ambedkar rightly defined the force by saying: *that which governs people is religion.*¹

Dr Ambedkar was not of opinion that religion is not needed for the society. He was of opinion that religion is essential to a society but had a very clear yardstick on the parameters to what kind of religion a society must be influenced by. He believed religion is necessary for society.² Religion must mainly be a matter of principles only. It cannot be a matter of rules. The moment it degenerates into rules it ceases to be a religion, a sit kills responsibility, which is the essence of a truly religious act.³

¹Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar *Writing and Speeches*, Vol. 17, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1994, p.121.

²Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar *Writing and Speeches*, Vol. 3, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1994, p.442.

³Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar *Writing and Speeches*, Vol. 1, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1994, p.75.

Borrowing the spirit from the Buddha's creed he sets the following yardsticks on the notion of religion:

Religion should be the force which deepens the solidarity of human relationships which should bring the citizens together for social unity. In order to bring about a sense of social fraternity and solidarity, Dr. Ambedkar accentuated on spiritual unity of the people on the basis of fraternity and humanity (*Mānusaki* – the word he used in Marathi). No reforms or alterations within Hinduism would help to create an egalitarian society, as long as it believes in caste. Hinduism, therefore, could be based by default on inequality among different castes. It teaches inequality between men and men, and men and women. Caste, in fact, promotes and justifies inequality by leveraging religion. Thus, Hinduism breathes caste and perpetuates hierarchical society.

As stated above Dr. Ambedkar was of well-founded opinion that slavery is an *antithesis* to religion. He did not refute the significance of a religion for a society. But he prescribed the criterion for religion in modern time:

1. Religion is necessary for a free Society.
2. Not every Religion is worth having.
3. Religion must relate to the facts of life and not to theories and speculations about God or Soul or Heaven or Earth.
4. It is wrong to make God the centre of religion.
5. It is wrong to make animal sacrifices to be the centre of religion.
6. Real religion lives in the heart of man and not in the *Shastrās*.
7. Man and morality must be the centre of religion. If not, religion is a cruel superstition.
8. It is not enough for morality to be the ideal of life. Since there is no God it must become the law of life.
9. The function of Religion is to reconstruct the world and to make it happy and not to explain its origin or its end.
10. That private ownership of property brings power to one class and sorrow to another.
11. That it is necessary for the good of Society that this sorrow be removed by removing its cause.
12. All human beings are equal.
13. Worth and not birth is the measure of man.
14. What is important is high ideals and not noble birth.
15. *Maitri* (loving-kindness) or fellowship towards all must never be abandoned. One owes it even to one's enemy.
16. Everyone has a right to learn. Learning is as necessary for man to live as food is.

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17. Learning without character (morality) is dangerous.
 18. Nothing is infallible. Nothing is binding forever. Everything is subject to inquiry and examination.
 19. Everything is subject to the law of causation.
 20. Nothing is permanent or *sanātan*. Everything is subject to change. Being is always becoming.
 21. The victor has duties towards the vanquished.⁴

He articulates: I believe that the religion is necessary for the mankind. When religion ends the society would perish too. After all no society can safeguard and discipline mankind as *niti* or dharma.⁵ Whatever maybe the metaphysical basis of a religion, those religious principles upon which depends the ethical system and the social practices of a people must be considered to be the principal element of that religion. Though Hinduism based on the conception of absolute Brahma the practice of the Hindu community as a whole are founded on the doctrines of inequality as pronounced in *Manusmriti*.⁶ As he explores the need of religion for the society he opines: some people think that religion is not essential to society. I do not hold this view. I consider the foundation of religion to be essential to the life and practices of society.⁷

The forces of law are compelling on the people while the principles guide them, therefore it is essential to correct the religion in terms of principles than imposed views (*ditti*) or rules (*niyama*). “Law and religion are two forces, which governs the conduct of man and at times they act handmaid to each other. At other times, they act as check and counter – check of the two forces, law is personal while religion is impersonal. Law being personal it is capable of being unjust and inequalities. But religion being impersonal, it can be impartial. If religion remains impartial, it is capable of defeating the inequity committed by law.”⁸ He observes this process not just in terms of Indian religious context but also cites the global harmony is failed because of these forces if religion is not taken impersonally. Dr Ambedkar differentiates by citing facts in terms of consequences, if religion is not in the spirit of force of impersonal and if it becomes doctrinal / ideological in terms of set of rules. “Religion can help to produce Justice within a community. Religion cannot produce justice between communities. At any rate, religion has failed to produce justice between Negroes and Whites, in the United States. It has failed to produce justice between German and French and between them and the other nations. The call of nation and the call of community has proved more powerful than the call of religion for justice.”⁹

⁴Ambedkar B. R., *Buddha or Karl Marx, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writing and Speeches*, Vol. 3, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1994, p.442.

⁵*Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writing and Speeches, Vol. 1*, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1994, p.367

⁶*Babasaheb Ambedkar Writing and Speeches, Vol. 1*, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1994, p.138.

⁷*Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writing and Speeches, Vol. 1*, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1994, p.138

⁸*Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writing and Speeches, Vol. 5*, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1994, p.93.

⁹(W & S Vol 5 p. 398). *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writing and Speeches, Vol. 5*, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1994, p. 398.

On the basis of above observance Dr Ambedkar inspects the four characteristics of religion:

Firstly: The society must have either the sanction of law or the sanction of morality to hold it together without either the society is sure to go to pieces.

Secondly: religion if it is to function must be in accord with reason which is another name of science.

Thirdly: it is not enough for religion to consist of a moral code but its moral code must recognize the fundamental tannates of liberty, equality and fraternity.

Fourthly: religion must not sanctify or ennoble poverty.¹⁰

He recognized that Buddhism fulfilled these requirements and so among the existing religions Buddhism was only the religion, he conformed, the world could have. The religion which discriminates between tow followers is partial and would eventually be responsible for polar society based on the privileged and underprivileged in any society. “The religion that treats cores of its adherence worse than dogs and criminals and inflicts upon them insufferable disabilities, is no religion at all. Religion is not the appellation for such an unjust order. Religion and slavery are incompatible.”¹¹

He did study all the religions of the world with the comparative mind and with critical pedagogy. He denied to accept what is automatically given in the form of religious doctrine. Instead of accepting what is given as it is he did investigate the philosophy of all religions on the test of human morality, nondiscriminatory spirit of the principles, compassion, and reason / wisdom. He was of thought that “to hold that all religions are true and good is to cherish a belief which is positively and demonstrably wrong. The most harmful one is the one I was mentioned namely that all religion are equally good and that there is no necessity of discriminating between them. Nothing can be a greater error than this. Religion is an institution or an influence and like all social influences and institutions, it may help or it may harm a society, which in its grip.”¹²

His investigative and moral mind saw clearly what is genuinely right that falling into a category of religiously right and wrong. The notion of good and bad differs from religion to religion and it is often guided by the blind conventions that most of the religions that are followed in the world. In this sense religion is a force that does not even allow human rational to investigate in its morals, rituals, and beliefs with open and critical mind; what Buddhism would call it a Kalama Spirit. As the Buddha evoked the test even for his own teaching by teaching to his disciples:

¹⁰Keer Dhananjay, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, p. 421.

¹¹ Keer Dhananjay, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, p. 92.

¹²*Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writing and Speeches, Vol. 3*, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1994, p. 24.

O bhikshus and wise men, just as a goldsmith would test his gold by burning, cutting, and rubbing it, so you must examine my words and accept them, but not merely out of reverence for me.

– Ghanavyuha sutra (Sutra of Dense Array)

Likewise Dr Ambedkar investigated in the matter of religions with a Kalama Spirit. He examines them on the fire /flame of his own experiences and explains: “religion maybe alike in that they all teach that the meaning of life is to be found in the pursuit of ‘good’. But all religion are not alike in their answers to the question ‘what is good?’ In this they certainly differ. One religion holds that brotherhood is good, another caste and untouchability is good...there are permanent differences in the methods of promoting good as they conceive it. Are there not religions which advocates violence? Given these facts how can it be said that all religions are the same and there is no reason to prefer one to the other.”¹³

In his magnum opus titled *The Buddha and His Dhamma* he tests the notion of religion on the basis of morality, reason, and liberation. In this goliath work in Book III (Part III, IV, V) he defines what is religion (Dhamma), what is not religion (Adhamma), and what is the best religion (Sadhmma). The following list of his articulation in terms of what should and what should not be the best of religion manifest his ideas and philosophy of religion. One may even call the following parameters as he sorts out for any religion is his *Blue Print for a Religion*.

What is Dhamma ?

1. To Maintain Purity of Life is Dhamma.
2. To Reach Perfection in Life is Dhamma.
3. To Live in Nibbana is Dhamma.
4. To Give up Craving is Dhamma.
5. To believe that all compound things are impermanent is Dhamma.
6. To believe that Karma is the instrument of Moral Order is Dhamma. ¹⁴

What is Not—Dhamma?

1. Belief in the Supernatural is Not—Dhamma.
2. Belief in Ishwara (God) is Not Essentially Part of Dhamma.
3. Dhamma Based on Union with Brahma is a False Dhamma.
4. Belief in Soul is Not—Dhamma.
5. Belief in Sacrifices is Not—Dhamma.
6. Belief Based on Speculation is Not—Dhamma.
7. Reading Books of Dhamma is Not—Dhamma.
8. Belief in the Infallibility of Books of Dhamma is Not— Dhamma. ¹⁵

¹³Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar *Writing and Speeches, Vol. 5*, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1994, pp. 405-6.

¹⁴Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar *Writing and Speeches, Vol. 11*, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1994, p. 227. (The list of content quoted as it is from the given refence.)

What is Saddhamma?

Section I—*The Functions of Saddhamma.*

1. To cleanse the Mind of its impurities.
2. To make the world a Kingdom of Righteousness. Section II—*Dhamma to be Saddhamma must promote*

Pradnya.

1. Dhamma is Saddhamma when it makes learning open to all.
2. Dhamma is Saddhamma when it teaches that mere learning is not enough. It may lead to pedantry.
3. Dhamma is Saddhamma when it teaches that what is needed is Pradnya.

Section III—*Dhamma to be Saddhamma must promote Maitri.*

1. Dhamma is Saddhamma only when it teaches that mere Pradnya is not enough. It must be accompanied by Sila.
2. Dhamma is Saddhamma only when it teaches that besides Pradnya and Sila what is necessary is Karuna.
3. Dhamma is Saddhamma only when it teaches that more than Karuna what is necessary is Maitri.

Section IV—*Dhamma to be Saddhamma must pull down all social barriers.*

1. Dhamma to be Saddhamma must break down barriers between man and man.
2. Dhamma to be Saddhamma must teach that worth and not birth is the measure of man.
3. Dhamma to be Saddhamma must promote equality between man and man.¹⁶

In other words, religion in his vision, in my opinion, is the new life that brings the very special view (*ditti*) about knowing the nature of reality *as it is*. What the Buddha called is the *sammā-ditti* which opened up the new horizons and true nature of reality which were buried under the debris of conditions because of religious and cultural dogmatism; in other words wrong views (*mitthyā-ditti*). The great act of Buddhist conversion led by Dr Ambedkar spouted a new life in the millions of so-called lower castes Indians with the new and true perspective to understand a potential that each individual carries and to impetus the positive energy for the transformation of the world around an

¹⁵Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writing and Speeches, Vol. 11, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1994, p. 247. (The list of content quoted as it is from the given refence.)

¹⁶Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writing and Speeches, Vol. 11, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1994, p. 279.(The list of content quoted as it is from the given refence.)

individual on the basis of right view. In this sense, his religious philosophical perspective entwines the transformation of self and the world on the basis of Dhamma – the impersonal force.

His vision of religion opened up a new window for so called untouchables, non-untouchables and for non-Buddhists to look at Indian religious past with deep critical introspection in the very nature of self and religious culture that had been conditioned by the old ritualistic dogmatism that was based on hierarchy in every sphere of life. This dogmatic religious hierarchy became the barrier to bring about a true harmonious society for the development and emancipation of an individual.

This is where Dr Ambedkar departs from the *selfish-ideal* to the *selfless-ideal* based on *anātmanvāda* (the doctrine of no-self) taught by the Buddha. It is on the basis of Buddha's *right view* Ambedkar turns to the constructive side of the problem. In his view an ideal society must not be based on selfish-ideals but must be based on selfless-ideal to bring about the reconstruction in an individual, in a society, and in the world on the basis of religion (the Dhamma).

He states: if you ask me, my ideal would be a society based on Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity... there should be varied and free points of contact with other modes of association...in other words there must be social-endosmosis.”¹⁷ In this sense, the revival of Buddhism sprouted the a new view and a new life in India and in the world.

It would be worth to note that a talk by Dr Ambedkar was broadcasted in May 1956 from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), London, on *Why I like Buddhism and how it is useful to the world in its present circumstances*. He observed:

I prefer Buddhism because it does give three principles in combination which no other religion does. Buddhism teaches *prajna* (wisdom) understanding as against superstition and supernaturalism; *karuna* (compassion); and *samata* (equality). This is what man wants for a good life Neither God nor soul can save society. Marxism and Communism have shaken the religious systems of all countries...Buddhistic countries that have gone over to communism do not understand what communism is. Communism of the Russian type aims at bringing it about by a bloody revolution. The Buddhist way communism brings it about by a bloodless revolution. The South-East Asian should be aware of jumping into the Russian net. All that is necessary for them is to give political form to Buddha's teaching. Poverty there is and there will always be. Even in Russia there is poverty. But poverty cannot be an excuse for sacrificing human freedom. Once it is realized that Buddhism is a social gospel, its revival would be an everlasting event.¹⁸

Sakyamuni Buddha regards morality as the centre of his Dhamma, “Real Religion lives in the heart of man and not in the Shastras. Man and morality must be the centre of Religion. If not, Religion is a cruel superstition. It is not enough for Morality to be the ideal of life. Since

¹⁷ Ambedkar, B. R., *Annihilation Caste*, Samyak Prakashan, Delhi, p. 36.

¹⁸ Keer Dhananjay, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, p. 498.

there is no God it must become the law of life.” It was this purified form of Dhamma which Ambedkar proposed for the establishment of a new equalitarian society.

Conclusion

The recognition of mind that Dr Ambedkar is so concern and invested in, formulating his lifelong project as an attempt to free this mind. He firmly believed that it is the reclamation of human personality with its fullest potential is the prime vision of an individual. He notably said, that *cultivation of mind should be the ultimate aim of human existence*. In other words, it is an essence of what the Buddha said in the first verse of the Dhammapada: the mind is the basis for everything, everything is created by mind and is ruled by mind. If we direct our mind in the direction of skilful acts it will shine and will turn to the dark if we perform unskilful acts. If we speak or act with unskilful thought the suffering will follow. By recognising this potential without any control over humanity Dr. Ambedkar revolutionize the human potential. Here, without control over humanity also includes denial of superhuman being, any supernatural forces, dogmatic divine power, and even power of God. It is the power of your action and worth that counts and brings the evolution in human mind. Dr Ambedkar, thus made the Buddhist project as a philosophy of religion in our times, as an attempt to pursue *freedom of mind*.

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