



## Self and ethics: Buddhist conceptual development in Indian political thought

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to understand the ways in which Buddhist thought informed and inflected social and political engagement in India, primarily through two thinkers, B.R. Ambedkar and Gandhi. I look at some concepts in Buddhist theory, concerning the critique and treatment of self and how they have been understood in these thinkers' thought and writings in developing ideas of ethical and political.

**Keywords:** Indian political thought, B.R. Ambedkar and Gandhi, developing ideas

### Introduction

#### Ambedkar's interpretation and exposition of Buddhism

Ambedkar's journey toward formally converting to Buddhism was preceded by a long complex period of study of Buddhism and his pre-occupation with the problem of caste hierarchy and injustices. The query both philosophical and practical into whether Hinduism could be practiced without caste led him to immerse himself into the study of Hinduism and other religions. Dissatisfied and convinced that any examples of Hindu practice without casteism was not to materialize, given the Hindu leadership's unwillingness to undertake radical social reform (Gokhale, 2009) <sup>[5]</sup>, he evaluated both the need and importance of religion, approaches to religion and various religious philosophies. Thus, the interest and eventual conviction in Buddhist thought and practice comes both from critical attitude toward religion and the basis of evaluation primarily being how it serves the social order.

Upon further investigation into the problem he is concerned with, as well as his writings on Buddhism, it can be seen that there are certain features of Buddhism that can be seen to resonate with him. The importance of reason and rationality as opposed to superstition and blind faith, rejection of anything that encouraged dogmatic belief, rejection of caste hierarchy and discrimination; and ethical conduct disassociated with any notion of creator god or soul. Looking at these core aspects of Buddhist thought as rational, secular, moral/ethical and egalitarian, it is quite evident its appeal to a thinker like Ambedkar. However, there is some re-interpretation or divergence from 'traditional' Buddhism that is perceived by most scholars in his work.

The impetus for Buddha to become a seeker and leave his house has also been reframed by Ambedkar. He stresses the complex process of encountering social conflict and reflecting on the same that built his motivation to end social conflict and thus choose not to return home after resolving one such conflict over access to water. Ambedkar also engages with the question of suffering and rejects the understanding of it that he perhaps found most widely available and read, considering life, birth and existence as suffering to be pessimistic. The issue he takes with this presentation comes from the importance of giving hope to people in the face of distress and pain, as the problem of

suffering is that of how to remove the suffering from the world and that does not make available the option of receding from the world. He says that the world is full of suffering and that how to remove the suffering is the only purpose of Dhamma.

For the purpose of achieving this goal, Ambedkar sees the ethical conduct through the paramitas and particularly prajna-paramita to be important and instrumental; since that is the practice of perfecting of qualities that can only happen in and through social life, permeating interactions with all beings and inculcating the 'right' view eventually of how one understands self and the relation with others. Dhamma in fact becomes a way of life based on ethical and moral conduct, which aims at the well-being of the whole humanity.

Another area of concern regarding existing ways of Buddhist order was to reject the distinction or hierarchy between the Hinayana or now commonly called Early Buddhism and Mahayana. It is seen that Ambedkar does not follow this distinction and takes and emphasizes elements that are otherwise associated with both of them. However, it is not just amalgamation or an indifference to this distinction that his perspective is seen as; his reflection and writing on Buddhist thought and practice is considered by many scholars to be a re-interpretation and for some even a reconstruction of Buddhism. It is pertinent to see the connection between the elements that he chooses to clearly explicate in his work. For instance, the social role of the Bhikkhu, the practice of paramitas, emphasis on both prajna (wisdom) and karuna (compassion) seen as part of Mahayana while accepting 'realist' ontology of Hinayana while not simply adopting Hinayana either (Gokhale 2009, Verma 2021) <sup>[5, 11]</sup>. Ambedkar himself creates a framework to clarify the passage and development of insight and discipline onto social behaviour and the inextricability of both.

#### Organization of the Buddha's teachings: Primacy to the relation between men

In 'The Buddha and His Dhamma', Ambedkar divides the Buddha's teachings into three parts: Dhamma, non-Dhamma and Sadhamma (Ambedkar, 2011) <sup>[11]</sup>. He explains Dhamma through the purpose it serves and identifies that in the way that 'to maintain purity of life, to reach perfection in life, to

live in Nibbana to give up craving, to believe all compound things are impermanent, to believe that karma is the instrument of moral order is dhamma.' All of these features are present in canonical sources as well. Maintaining the purity of life outlines the ethical conduct or shila that enable one to cultivate four mindfulnesses that in turn help in developing the correct perspectives regarding the body, feelings, mind and ideas. These practices of shila are geared toward training oneself in avoiding harmful or non-virtuous actions at the offset. The section on perfection focuses on perfecting body, speech and mind and details the different paramitas, the perfecting of which is the conduct of the bodhisattva. Nibbana is explained as that which gives real happiness and means not falling prey to one's passions or fetters to nibbana, those of attachment, aversion and ignorance. Ambedkar distinguishes this concept of nibbana as different from Brahmanic and Upanishadic conceptions of nibbana that were embedded in disassociation with the world. He identifies this to be the Middle Way, as neither complete annihilation nor Parinibbana. Next Ambedkar identifies greed or craving as that to be condemned. From the Anguttara Nikaya he quotes why that is so, 'because many a bad and wicked state of things arises- blows and wounds, strife, contradiction and retorts; quarrelling, slander, and lies.' Ambedkar holds this to be a correct analysis of class struggle and thus, why the Buddha insisted upon the control of greed and craving. In explaining the impermanence of all compound or conditioned things, Ambedkar sees the impermanence of the body and the living being both in terms of death as well as constant change during life. This leads to the concept of 'Sunnyata' which he explains does not mean nihilism per say. It is on account of Sunnyata that everything becomes possible, for it means perpetual changes are occurring at every moment in the phenomenal world. Finally, Ambedkar supplants God with karma, or man's actions and its effects as that which maintains a certain moral order. He argues that Buddha accrues this position to karma instead of a God because an individual's actions affect others and contribute to creating a certain kind of moral order even after that person has passed. The law of karma, as a function of causality and consequent effects is related to that of the general moral order.

Ambedkar creates the category of Not-Dhamma as direct response to the prevailing hierarchical social order and the Brahmanic conceptions underpinning that. He identifies certain features that are categorically not Dhamma: belief in supernatural, belief in Ishwar (God), dhamma based on union with Brahma, belief in soul, sacrifices and speculations, reading books of Dhamma and belief in the infallibility of books of Dhamma. Here, Ambedkar makes a strong case for rational thought and inquiry against blind belief and superstition, attacking the privilege and superiority claims of possessing knowledge of dharma primarily by the Brahmins. Additionally, by using the negative here, he highlights what is not the function of Brahma, belief true knowledge and there being no defense for restricted access to the same.

Sadhamma is particularly important and interesting for us to look at, as even though Ambedkar alludes to that as being the Philosophy of Dhamma, his description of the same refers more to the social relevance, application in fact the sphere within which dhamma is to be practiced and thus

exists. Gail Omvedt clarifies that the usage of 'philosophy' is different from the current form in which it refers to a discipline and given his sociological academic background and concern for eradicating societal conflict, Ambedkar uses the word as a total social perspective, elaborating sadhamma as the social dimension of dhamma (Omvedt, 2003) [8]. Gokhale further explains that Dhamma according to Ambedkar stands for a secular moral way of life in which one tries to be free from passions and craving and attain perfection by realizing impermanence of all things. Dhamma in this way refers to an individual moral perspective. Now if the same individual perspective becomes a social phenomenon, refers to moral relationships among all the members of the society, it refers to a total social perspective on dhamma and hence can adequately be termed as Sadhamma.

Ambedkar states the functions of Sadhamma to be twofold: 'to cleanse the mind of its impurities' and 'to make the world a kingdom of righteousness'. Mind and thought as the cause of all reality makes the nature of one's mind and thus, training of one's mind essential. 'If in the mind there are good thoughts, then the words are good and the deeds are good and happiness which results from such conduct follows the man, as the shadow accompanies the substance.' (Ambedkar, 2011, p. 151). Buddha's conception of the path and conduct enable to constitute a way of life which alone can make a man righteous. The notion of righteous here is tied to misery. 'Man's misery is the result of man's inequity to man. Only righteousness can remove this inequity and the resultant misery.' (Ambedkar, 2011, p. 152) In this way Ambedkar clarifies how the cultivation of self is tied to the nature of social order. Because of this relationship, the role of religion or specifically what the Buddha taught becomes so crucial for him. Religion thus, must inculcate upon the mind of man, the supreme necessity for being righteous in his conduct and the discernment between right and wrong.

### **The Bhikkhu as an agent of social change**

The role and figure of the Bhikkhu is of great importance for Ambedkar, as one who strives for the well being and happiness of others. From his writings and expositions of the Buddha's teachings and core Buddhist concepts it is easy to anticipate that Bhikkhu, as one who embodies these values and pledges to relentlessly inculcate them and teach them to others, would be a strong agent of social change. This highlights the recurring debate over there being any contradiction between politics and Buddhist practice. Is the way of practice that of focus on personal emancipation or soteriological liberation necessarily and is it Ambedkar's intervention to change that understanding? This is an interesting area of investigation. Ambedkar's interest in the Bhikkhu is rooted in the social role that the Bhikkhu should play, given the values intrinsic to Buddhist practice such as love, friendship, egalitarianism. Contrary to these translations of Buddhist ideas into practice, Ambedkar emphasizes the social role of the Bhikkhu who cannot remain mentally and morally independent. Trying to attain 'perfection in self-culture' is certainly part of the Bhikkhu's practice but unless that serves to engage, empathize and work to remove the woes of mankind, such a person is not a Bhikkhu. The analogy for a Bhikkhu is that of a warrior who does not avoid fighting when virtue is in danger.

### **Building relationship with political values**

Ambedkar's engagement with Buddhism and why it resonates with him, leading to a particular exposition by him is also to be understood in the context of his vision of the society, at the heart of which are the values of liberty equality and fraternity. He recognizes these in Buddhism and also takes on the task to exhibit how these are evident in Buddhist literature and ways in which Buddha was an advocate for the same. Gopal Guru highlights the core of Ambedkar's quest that underlines this endeavour. Ambedkar's treatment of Brahminism is that of a varna ideology and elements of that operate at all levels across various castes and sub-castes. 'In Ambedkar's conceptual scheme, caste which has been arranged on the hierarchical or relative social superiority, renders any social or political consciousness difficult. Hence, he suggests total demolition of the caste system.' (Guru, 2020, p. 120)<sup>[7]</sup> Guru goes on to explain this in the light of a discussion on the text 'Buddha and Karl Marx', regarding the conceptual limitation of Marxist concept of alienation as well as building a collective consciousness on that basis.

Drawing from these arguments the implication is that the conceptual scheme of Buddhism including the structure of ethical practice it details has the means to address and counter both the graded inequality and the consequent fragmentation into hostile identities as well as basis of untouchability as identification with being defiled. The notions of purity and pollution by birth, being neither voluntary nor permitting escape or mobility, are so intensely reified and form core of caste identities and the experience and perpetuation of constant stigma and humiliation. The economic, social, cultural and personal implications of caste are entangled which can be combated by the tools provided by Buddhism.

Gopal Guru looks at this particular version of Buddhism elaborated and adopted by Ambedkar to be 'a far more superior alternative, not only to Hinduism but to other forms of Buddhism prevailing in residual forms during his time. He also considers Ambedkar's radical reading in comparison to the more visible forms of it prevailing at the time as an attempt at offering an alternative to the hegemonies of Marxism in India. Pointing to the attempts at different versions of Marxism in terms of location as re-contextualization of Marxism prompted by the specific context-dependent need of a particular society and social groups within that society, he holds that Ambedkar's Buddhism to be a superior alternative compared to the possibility of developing Dalit Marxism which would be a restrictive discursive option (Guru, 2020). It could be possible to look at increasing work in the area of thinking with Buddhism as a critical thought tradition for the contemporary similarly.

### **Gandhi—exploring non-violence as a method**

Gandhi draws on an eclectic tradition of Indian philosophical and religious traditions in his own meditations of non-violence and very often, in his writings his thought is not always clearly delineated. In this respect it is difficult to understand his formulations outside of the logic and impulses of these traditions. Through these foundations of his philosophy, it is possible to explore alternative ways of being and understanding self and social reality. His thought has already been noted for its critique of western liberalism and modernity.

In my attempt to read Gandhi, my interest lies in looking at some of the epistemological foundations of his thought and how that can lead us to reflect over contemporary feminist

politics and debates and the way they are framed, as well as recovering new ways of ethical thinking that can guide us in some of the impasses we face.

In this regard, first we can look at the conception of self over which his idea of non-violence (Ahimsa) is built. Gandhi expressly rejected the liberal idea of independently existing and autonomous individual and puts forth the notion of interdependent selves and a way of understanding and engaging with social reality that foregrounds a deep interlinkage between thought, action and consequence that draws on non-dualistic philosophies. A rejection of subject-object dualism provides an impulse in looking at difference as it emerges necessarily in contingent ways and also makes an ethical practice of a negation of self precisely due to this relationality, arguing against self-interested individual.

Gandhi's idea of truth does not refer to a description of externally existing reality or objective conditions rather it is the moral experience and subjectivity that he foregrounds. As a consequence, one does not uphold the truth for the sake of the truth or principles per say, but rather the truth becomes the site for ethical reflection and relation upon the self and its relation with others. Hence the Satyagrahi is one who sets the moral example, in insisting on or in pursuit of truth.

### **Satyagrahi's reduction to 'zero' and unconditional equality**

The use of shunyata in Gandhi's writings is particularly in reference to the Satyagrahi who must reduce herself to 'zero'. As always, given the amalgamation of ideas and traditions, and no obligation to use the terminology of a particular tradition this leads a bit of confusion asks for greater examination.

Shunyata starts emerging in his writings in different ways, as what has to be worshipped and meditated upon but that is also very difficult to meditate upon. 'The moment we attribute a single quality to God, we cease to worship shunya. We should love as ciphers. I talk about reducing oneself to zero everywhere.' (Gandhi, 1929) The stayagrahi's vow is distinctive because of this insistence on ciphering, which necessarily entails an absolute oneness and unconditional equality. "Realization of the doctrine seems to be impossible unless we could reduce the 'I' in us to a complete cipher."

This notion and practice of ciphering speaks to the matter of understanding absolute and unconditional equality across irreconcilable difference. Such equality involves also a relinquishment of rights. "We wish to establish unity with 30 crore people. This would happen only when we make ourselves into a cipher. What have we to do with rights? Politics of power is unreal. We must tell the people what is real politics." Rights must be relinquished because they are organized around sovereignty— more specifically, autonomy. In the wake of the destruction of rights, Gandhi often emphasizes farj— obligation or duty. (Skaria, Unconditional Equality, 2017)<sup>[10]</sup>

In the framework of sovereignty and agency it is difficult to even conceptualize this 'satyagrahi-cipher' for the notion of sovereignty and autonomy essential to make decision and act is completely denounced. Skaria argues that 'satyagrahis refuse both subordination to and exercise of sovereign power. As such, they cannot be either effective means to an end or ends in themselves.' (Skaria 2017, 242)<sup>[10]</sup> He terms this 'relinquishment of agency'. Yet the satyagrahi has power and clearly the decision-making ability is exercised constantly without which politics and ethics cannot be undertaken or simply existence itself. The off-setting of the

free sovereign agent then leads Gandhi to one the decision is marked by 'automaticity and machinicity'.

'To do one's duty [kartavya karma] means to fight and struggle. Since every karma involves a choice, there is necessarily a struggle. Even though caught in this way between opposites, you will have transcended them if you dedicate every action to Krishna, do everything without attachment or aversion, have faith in God and present every karma as a gift [daan] to Him. If you put all on God ["believe God to be the author of all you do"], you will be touched neither by sin nor by virtue' (Gandhi, 1926)

Here, of course, even as we see an amalgamation of traditions, God is truth for Gandhi. The analogy of the gift impresses a meaning of not dominating the other or self. Being fuelled and authored by the truth then is automatically without attachment or aversion. Thus, espousing non-violence.

'There is no outward difference between a fool and a wise man. The fool has no pretensions. The wise man wants to be taken as a fool by the world. To the world, the behaviour of the two will seem alike. The man whose mind is active with intense energy will appear dull. The earth rotates with such great speed that it seems to be stationary. This is not a matter of shunya. Buddha's nirvana was also not shunya. There is only a seeming inertness.' Here shunya as inertness and nullity is disavowed. For Gandhi, the Satyagrahi makes no difference between the Buddha's shunyata and nirvana for Buddha's shunyata-nirvana is the most intense activity possible. Practicing self-sacrifice in the spirit of machinity, the Satyagrahi must forget and perhaps not even know that he has offered self-sacrifice.

'As breathing, winking and similar processes are automatic and man claims no agency for them, he being conscious of the processes only when disease or similar cause arrests them, in a similar manner all his activities should be automatic, without his arrogating to himself the agency or responsibility thereof. A man of charity does not even know that he is doing charitable acts, it is his nature to do so, he cannot help it. This detachment can only come from tireless endeavour and God's grace.' The non-knowledge does not symbolize lack of effort or agency in undertaking such ethical conduct, in fact the tireless endeavour already points to the rigorous treatment of self prescribed earlier that leads to such automatic activity. Ciphred by their love, satyagrahis take on themselves the responsibility for the wounds the other inflicts on them.

The ciphering also leads to assessing the relationship between human beings and other beings. The question is posed as to how that relationship can become that of equality while accepting the differences between them. Gandhi already distinguishes humans for having the capacity to be non-violent. Skaria explains this to be a distinguishing feature in the sense that violence distinguishes from all other animals and because of this, man is also distinguished by the potentiality for and orientation toward non-violence. Thus, offering a self-sacrifice is driven by the care and love that relinquishes mastery. Infused with this is the shunyata embodying automatic conduct which thus, is no longer hierarchical. The sacrifice in this case is the sacrifice of the power to harm others. The ciphering of self involving the sacrifice of ability to harm is then inhabited as general responsibility.

In this way the relinquishment of rights is echoed also in relinquishment of or lack of faith in liberal democratic institutions or 'modern civility'. In order to address any conflict, there is by default mistrust in the other when using these instruments for the trust is posed not in the other but in

the state, law, government etc that binds both parties. Such institutions can at most enforce reconciliation, clemency, abstract trust, and other related practices; they are incapable of immeasurable trust, repentance or forgiveness. Satyagrahis thus must everybody unconditionally, without exception even after their trust is betrayed.

### In response to difference and violence

One reading of this subjective experience as truth has been of what one can consider the primacy of "lived experience". Ajay Gudavarthy critiques the truth 'conscience' as Gandhi sometimes puts it to be, for its presentation of an essentialised experience that claims authenticity and excludes all others and so forecloses possibility of radical change, a charge that he levies against identitarian politics too (Gudavarthy, 2008) <sup>[6]</sup>. However, this may not be a wholly adequate reading of Gandhi's notion of truth. The realm of moral experience that he provides, is not one of a homogeneous static experience from a particular standpoint, rather one of self-reflection and a possibility of cultivation of self that is not seen in isolation from others. The idea of disciplining through vows and the model of exemplar (though contested for other reasons, some of which will be taken up later) themselves emerge from this.

Understanding difference through contingency and restrain from moral criticism as a form of politics finds great resonance in contemporary debates over agency and legal discourse. Here Gandhi presents a bold alternative of the exemplar and also very much embedded in the social and historical situation. The exemplar and the reconciliation cannot be understood without registering contingency of difference that displays such an interrelatedness that leads one to a non-dualist approach to understanding the self. For what would lead one who can come through internal reflection to a moral judgment and be so concerned with relevance to others if one is not bound by a social contract? And it is this that leads us to understanding discipline and conduct espoused by Gandhi that I contend are not to be confused with inherent positions. By this framework, one can also understand his insistence on particularist, smaller settings of social organization and the Ashram as a way of practicing and setting exemplary practices that enable such relational cultivation of self (Skaria, 2002).

"To see the universal and all-pervading spirit of Truth face to face one must be able to love the meanest of creation as oneself. And a man who aspires after that cannot afford to keep out of any field of life. That is why my devotion of Truth has drawn me into the field of politics" (Gandhi, Truth is God, 1955) <sup>[4]</sup>

If we look at it from the standpoint of Ahimsa (non-violence), we find that the fulfilment of Ahimsa is impossible without utter selflessness. Ahimsa means universal love. Gandhi's thought borrows from several religious traditions as referred to earlier that build on notions of self and discipline as a matter of ethical conduct encouraging equanimity that is geared by cultivation of a realization of truths that are against establishing hierarchies of self and other and exhort a consideration of consequences of actions in this relational mode.

His method of setting examples and purification is better understood from within this logic and motivation, as opposed to inherent and unchanging positions of morality of right or wrong. It is possible to look at the imperatives that Gandhi eventually takes upon himself of building a collective movement of anti-colonial resistance that belied

the mode of particularist setting of an example and lead to an attempt for a large universal posed in terms for purification for all. However, I do not consider his assessment in this area to be decisive or an inherent inability to lead to a different conclusion from his philosophical imperatives.

### Conclusion

Both Ambedkar and Gandhi engage in textual study and interpretation of texts, in the process re-interpreting them as well as building a vocabulary, a conceptual resource, a guide post and even foundation for their political and ethical commitments in responding to the political challenges of their context. Suffused with these ideas, they chart out a graded path of training in enabling transformation, by way developing insight/wisdom/pradnya which is to be in tandem with reality.

Ambedkar incisively points to the purpose of religion to promote and secure equality because the society may not ensure the same. It is evident here the trajectory of his own political engagement through his life time. He does not setup the political and religious as two mutually exclusive realms, nor does he abandon and choose one over the other.

In his aim to secure equality and dignity of all beings, the role of a person's disposition, their perspective toward another human being is crucial and the quest for what will ensure transformation and successfully achieving a disposition that exhibits equality and is self cultivated and nurtured leads him to the practices outlined in his conception of dhamma. Ambedkar next highlights the necessity of shila over the necessity of pradnya. The value of knowledge lies in how it informs conduct and apart from that knowledge has no other purpose or value. As Ambedkar quotes the Dhammapada in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, 'The purpose of Tathagata 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 to do so.'

Ambedkar's coming to Buddhism seems a conclusive point after a long complex process of political engagement with institutions and he actively engages with other theoretical and analytical frameworks as well. He finds Buddhist path, as he understands and delineates to be conducive for social harmony, to be most effective. But he does not reject other frameworks outrightly and there is a continuing dialogue with them. Gandhi, on the other hand, rejects the modern colonial state institutions and political vocabulary outrightly. His thought and writings are more challenging to understand in relation to the traditions he draws on given that there is not much effort to clarify textual sources or engage in a dialogue separately with those traditions. Many times, in his writing one sees Jain, Buddhist and Hindu clubbed together. It is difficult to isolate one from this amalgamation. His writings, however, offer a rigorous reflection on the path to actualize the interior transformation which then dictates conduct and fuels orientation to the world. The philosophical foundations of Gandhi's thoughts on Truth and Non-violence can be of great interest and a matter of very productive enquiry for feminist politics. Some of his key insights are that of a disavowal of moral judgment and refusal of the split between subject and object, while being very attentive to the embedded nature of the encounters.

The figures of the bhikkhu, the bodhisattva and the satyagrahi figure prominently in their work and thought. These are not seen as isolated, monastic, exceptional figures. Rather these are meant to be emblematic of those embodying or on the path to cultivate the values they advocate for in order to become potent agents for change, a figure that every person is to aspire to. Their task is of self cultivation and embodying care, friendship and love in relationships, the core of constituting a social order that exhibits these and that enables inculcating them at large too. Thus, redressing an unequal hierarchical order and the problem of difference.

In looking at this body of work and thought and engaging with the importance of this critique and an alternative to liberal democratic tradition at the present, does not, however, imply an essentialist desire to recover an 'Indian' philosophy as necessarily superior or authoritatively relevant to understand the realities of our context as a response to the imperialist and orientalist legacies. It does however provide a site of reflection over the domain of knowledge production in this light and demands a closer consideration of the hierarchies that exist.

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