

## **DR. B. R. AMBEDKAR'S INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY OF BUDDHISM**

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### **Introduction:**

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar had been profoundly impressed with the philosophy of Buddha since his young age after having read a book on it gifted to him by his teacher, Keluskar Sir. As he embarked on to his higher education his interest in world religions made urged him to study about almost all well-established religions of the world. After having read a humongous level of literature about Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Jainism et all he chose to embrace Buddhism on renunciation of Hinduism in 1956. No wonder his literary works has immense literature on Buddha and Buddhism. His treatise, 'Buddha and His Dhamma' was written with the sole intention of providing a detailed book or gospel of Buddhism to the people. This paper aims at studying Dr. Ambedkar's understanding of the history of Buddhism in India, especially its rise and fall.

### **Buddhism as a religious and socio-political revolution:**

Dr. Ambedkar states that, "*Buddhism was a revolution. It was as great a revolution as the French Revolution.*" He has termed Buddhism as not only a revolution of religious nature but also a social and political one. He has provided a detailed description of the social condition prevalent before the rise of Buddhism. His motive behind this study of society is to emphasize the significance of rise of Buddhism as a revolutionary event. He has termed that the then existing Aryan civilization was nothing short of one being compared to the 'ancien regime' of France on the eve of French revolution. Thus, he stated that study of 'ancient Indian regime' is must to gauge the degree of impact Buddha and his teaching made.

Dr. Ambedkar has astutely presented the social conditions of India during Buddha's time (5th century B.C). In his words, '*The Aryan Community of his time was steeped in the worst kind of debauchery; social, religious and spiritual.*' Dr. Ambedkar has cited many examples of social evils like gambling, drinking and sexual immorality prevalent in ancient India from Mahabharata and Rig Veda. These evils were prevalent among both royalty and commoners. Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Shudras, rich or poor, all had succumbed to these social evils making the society quite degrading. The Priestly class of Brahmins too had stooped to low standards indulging in wrong means of livelihood, amassing wealth fraudulently and being addicted to luxuries against the moral laws of living meant for them.



Such were the conditions of society at large when Buddha and his teachings came to rise as a revolutionary event.

### **Buddhism as a religion of modern times:**

Dr. Ambedkar has accorded Buddhism as the religion which can stand the tests of modern times. This he claimed mainly due the fact that Buddha conspicuously put his teachings to open questioning by asking people to question and challenge his preached doctrines. If it did not satisfy their logical minds, Buddha gave an open access for alteration or even abandonment of his teachings. Dr. Ambedkar has emphasized this point of Buddhism as being the most progressive and scientific of all religions thereby making it an apt religion for ever changing time. Dr. Ambedkar also holds Buddha on the highest stature because of his 'Self-abnegation'. Buddha called himself to be a common man without prescribing any supernatural powers onto one. Thus, Buddhism as a religion was based on reason and experience.

Dr. Ambedkar states that Buddha's teachings and Buddhism are unique in the sense that there is no God in Buddhism. Then what is it based on...Dr. Ambedkar states that, *'What God is to other religions, morality is to Buddhism. In fact, it might be stated that the Buddha was the first teacher in the world who made morality the essence and foundation of religion.'* Hence religion of Buddha is nothing but morality.

Dr. Ambedkar rightly mentions that Buddhism brought about equality in ancient Indian society. The preaching and practice of equality by Buddha was evident from the fact that Buddha was an opponent of Chaturvarna system and made efforts to eradicate it. He allowed all classes of the society be it Shudras or even women to follow his teachings and also welcomed them in his religious social order i.e. Sangha of Bhikshus and Bhikshunis. Dr. Ambedkar has pointed out two purposes with which Buddha established his Sangha. One was to create a society of people who would follow Buddhist principles and the other was to create a body of intellectuals who would provide the layman true and impartial guidance. However, this Sangha could not withstand the test of time and its deterioration proved detrimental for the survival of Buddhism in India. Dr. Ambedkar has pointed out that the sanctity of Sangha could not be maintained as quality Bhikshus and Bhikshunis became a rarity in Sangha.

Thus, Dr. Ambedkar enunciates that Buddhism was a religion based on scientific reasoning devoid of ritualism and thereby fulfilling all requisites for being a religion of modernity.

### **Fall and disappearance of Buddhism from India:**

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar has written a scholarly work backed by many historical evidences on the reasons for fall of Buddhism in India. He has expressed surprise on the fact that when Buddhism which continued to survive and flourish in Asian countries of China, Japan, Burma (Myanmar), Siam (Thailand), Annam (Vietnam), Indo-China, Ceylon (Sri



Lanka) and parts of Malaya-Archipalego, its existence disappeared completely from its place of origin i.e. India. Furthermore, he has made a distinction between fall and decline of Buddhism. He states that the reasons for fall of Buddhism are quite obvious whereas the reasons for its decline are obscure.

He has attributed the invasions of Muslims as one of the major reasons for fall of Buddhism in India. He states that, *"Islam came out as the enemy of the 'But'. The word 'But' as everybody knows is an Arabic word and means an idol. Not many people however know what the derivation of the word 'But' is. 'But' is the Arabic corruption of Buddha. Thus, the origin of the word indicates that in the Moslem mind idol had come to be identified with the Religion of the Buddha."* He has described that Islam destroyed Buddhism from Asian countries of Bactria, Parthia, Afghanistan, Gandhar and Chinese Turkestan as and when the spread of Islam progressed eastwards.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar stated how Buddhism failed to survive the Islamic attack as against Hinduism which continued to be a dominant religious force in spite of being equally threatened by Islamic onslaughts. He has sighted three main reasons for this sustenance of Hinduism and disappearance of Buddhism with proper historical evidence. These are as below:

1. **No political support for Buddhism:** Dr. Ambedkar astutely mentions that the polity of India was majorly flanked by Hindu rulers when Islamic invaders began their conquest here. Muslim invaders penetrated in India beginning with the province of Sindh and gradually followed by Punjab, Bengal, Central India and regions to the south of India. Sindh was invaded by Ibn Kasim in 712 A.D and it was then governed by Dahir who belonged to a Brahmin dynasty. Similarly, Punjab province which was under the governance of a Kshatriya Buddhist dynasty was usurped by a Brahmin commander, Lalliya who founded the Brahmin Shahi Dynasty in 880 A.D. Punjab was under the rule of Hindu rulers Jayapala (960-980 A.D.), Anandpal (980-1000 A.D.) and Trilochanpal (1000-21 A.D.) at the time of its invasion by Sabuktigin and Mohammad. Central Indian kingdoms of Mewad, Bundelkhand, Sambhar, Anhilwad, Kannauj and Dhar were ruled by Rajputs who favoured Hinduism. These regions were repeatedly invaded by the Ghoris from Mohammad to Shahbuddin Ghor. West Bengal ruled by the Kings of the Pal dynasty and East Bengal ruled by the Kings of the Sena dynasty too supported Hinduism. Four kingdoms flourished in southern India which were all supporters of Hinduism during 1000 to 1200 A.D. i.e. the age of Muslim invasions. These were the Deccan Kingdom of Western Chalukyas, Southern Kingdom of the Cholas, Silahara Kingdom in Konkan on the West Coast and the Ganga Kingdom of Trikalanga on the East Coast. Under these four kingdoms were some feudatory rulers who later established their independent rule. They were Yadavas of Devagiri, Kakatiyas of Warangal, Hoyasalas of Halebid, Pandyas of Madura and Cheras of Travancore. They too were followers of Hinduism. The age of Muslim invasion of India began in 1001 A.D. and its major impact continued up to 1296 A.D when Allauddin Khilji attacked Devgiri. Minor wars for supremacy between Muslim invaders



and local rulers continued later too. But this blow of Islamic invasions to Hindu kingdoms did not completely diminish the Hindu rulers and their religion continued to thrive amidst such attack. However, Buddhism had no saviour during the Islamic onslaught especially so because the already sinking Hindu kingdoms were fighting for their political and religious survival. There were hardly any kingdoms ruled by Buddhist rulers and patronage by Hindu kingdoms was least expected when their religion was striving to survive. Thus, in the words of Dr. Ambedkar, '*Buddhism beaten and battered by the Muslim invaders had no such hope. It was an unweaned orphan and it withered in the cold blast of the native rulers and was consumed in the fire lit up by the conquerors.*'

2. **Destruction of Buddhist priests/monks by Islamic attacks:** Dr. Ambedkar has stated examples of mass massacre of Buddhist monks by Muslim invaders. These instances have been corroborated by Muslim historians alike. The destruction of Buddhist universities of Nalanda, Vikramasila, Jagaddala, Odantapuri etc. was done by these invaders. These universities also had monasteries adjoined to it and with its destruction mass massacre of Buddhist monks at the hands of invaders resulted in ousting monks to nearby regions of Nepal and Tibet. Bihar which was a major center of Buddhist education was put to ground by Mohammad Khilji, slave of Mohammad Ghor, in 1127 A.D. V. A Smith has put it thus, 'slaughter of shaven headed Brahmins i.e. Monks' was so completed that not a single learned man was around to explain the contents of books found in the libraries of monasteries. Thus, the destruction of Buddhist priests created a void which could not be filled for a very long time to come. The number of monks kept on dwindling and ordaining of new monks in Buddhism was not possible due to the prerequisites of ordainment. When there did arise a handful of monks over a period of time, they lacked the required scholarship and knowledge of Buddhism. In the absence of priestly class of Buddhists, the religion and its propagation came to a standstill. Thus, the destruction of monks and their monasteries proved detrimental to the existence of Buddhism in India. Dr. Ambedkar rightly stated that, '*Buddhism died because its army of priests died and it was not possible to create.*'
3. **Renunciation of Buddhism to embrace Islam due to fear of persecution:** Dr. Ambedkar states that conversion to the faith of Islam by the Buddhist population was one of the causes of the fall of Buddhism. The Chachnama, a Muslim Chronicle clearly mentions that in Sindh the Buddhist population faced humiliation under their Hindu rulers. Hence, on the arrival of Muslim invaders the Buddhists supported them with the hope of betterment of their lives. However, the Muslim rulers were no different and the Buddhists continued to suffer just as before. This provoked them to embrace Islam for want of better rights and privileges. Similarly, persecution of Buddhists population led to fall of Buddhism. The Huna king, Mihirkula of Punjab whose rule continued upto 528 A.D. had immense hatred towards Buddhists and he left no stone unturned to plunder and destroy their stupas and monasteries. Another ruler, Sasanka of Eastern India hated Buddhists and had caused widespread destruction of



Buddhist relics at Bodha Gaya and Patliputra. Thus, persecution of Buddhists by Hindu rulers led to conversion of Buddhists to Islam thereby resulting in fall of Buddhist population and ultimately Buddhist religion in India.

### **Conclusion:**

India as the birth place of Buddhism could not withstand the political and religious attack of Hindus and Muslims over the long run. The Buddhist monks too fled away from India taking along their teachings and Buddhism from its place of origin due to atrocities against them. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar thus interpreted the history of both rise and fall of Buddhism in India. He also made an in-depth study of Buddhist philosophy which he found to be purely scientific and fit for humanity. He embraced Buddhism in 1956 after renunciation of Hindu religion as he found merit and morality in it. Thus, his study of history of Buddhism can be stated to be based on proper historical evidences.

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