Buddhism Towards Social Justice: Interpreting Buddhist Social Work Ethical Principles through Dr. Ambedkar's Philosophy

Omalpe Somananda[1]

Abstract

The social welfare dimension of Buddhism has been opened up through teachings that encourage altruism. Buddhist social work is an action methodology that helps people achieve their welfare through the Buddhist philosophy-based social work approach. The foundation of Buddhist social work consists of human dignity, equality, and social justice. These values are essential factors for the survival of a society. Buddha has revealed that social unrest occurs when these values are alienated from society. Indian society, being a multicultural and multidisciplinary society, social imbalances are inevitable. Dr. Ambedkar has been identified as a strong figure who vehemently worked towards social justice. Dr. Ambedkar - a respected scholar in almost all the fields ultimately concluded his religious inclination towards Buddhism. In his writings and speeches, he covered a huge philosophical geography to map out the scientifically devised concept of Buddhism and its relevance in the state and society in all possible dimensions. He concluded that Buddhism is not merely a process of following a particular "deity" but to follow the path of scientific temperament which leads to intellectual growth and Enlightenment. Advocating in favor of Buddhism, he claimed that Buddhism is the only religion which ensures the idea of Egalitarianism and Utilitarianism in the Indian Society. Dr. Ambedkar's concept of social justice stands for liberty, equality, and fraternity of all human beings. They are congruent with ethical principles of Buddhist Social Work while the ethical principles are based on Buddhist social work's core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. These principles set forth ideals to which all Buddhist social workers should aspire. Objective of this study is to examine Buddhist Social Work Ethical Principles through Dr. Ambedkar's Philosophy. This is a qualitative research-based study supported by secondary data extracted from previous academic work. This study will be useful for scholars of Dr. Ambedkar's philosophy and researchers interested in the field of Buddhist social work.

[1] Authors' details: Dr. Omalpe Somananda, Senior Lecturer, Department of Buddhist Culture, Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka. omalpes@bpu.ac.lk

1. Introduction

The social welfare dimension of Buddhism has been opened up through teachings that encourage altruism. Buddhist Social Work is an action methodology that helps people to achieve their welfare and well-being through a Buddhist philosophy-based social work approach. The foundation of Buddhist social work consists of human dignity, equality and social justice. These are key values for a society to be civilized and sustainable. Buddha has revealed that social unrest occurs when these values are alienated from society. Because Indian society, is a multicultural and multidisciplinary society, social imbalances were inevitable Dr. Ambedkar emerged as a strong figure who vehemently worked towards minimizing gaps in social justice in order to bring relief to socially oppressed segments of people.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (December 6, 1956) was an Indian jurist, economist, social reformer and political leader who headed the committee drafting the Constitution of India from the Constituent Assembly debates, served as Law and Justice minister in the first cabinet of Jawaharlal Nehru, and inspired the Dalit Buddhist movement after renouncing Hinduism in India. *The Indian Express* News Paper wrote, "The most popular view among scholars is the fact that Buddhism was seen as the most modern and rational religion by Dr. Ambedkar (Tuesday, Sep 05, 2023)"- October 14, 1956 was clearly an important moment in Dalit history in India. On this day, B. R. Ambedkar, along with 365,000 of his Dalit followers, decided to exit the folds of Hinduism and embrace Buddhism. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism marked a moment when Dalits in the country got a new impetus and a voice that was hitherto constrained by the four-fold *varna* system (Caste system) dominating Hinduism. Ambedkar had long been frustrated by the basic tenets of Hinduism, and considered the inherent characteristics of the religion, particularly the caste system, to be a bigger threat to freedom in Indian society than that of the British. Unlike Mahatma Gandhi, who considered the internal reform of the caste system to be the way forward, Ambedkar believed that the only way the Dalits could find a place for themselves in Indian society was by way of conversion.

Dr. Ambedkar, being a uniquely respected scholar, ultimately identified Buddhist philosophy as the essential approach for his mission. In his writings and speeches, he covered a huge philosophical geography to map out the scientifically devised concept of Buddhism and its relevance in the state and society in all possible dimensions. He recognized Buddhism as a

practical path of scientific temperament which leads to intellectual growth and enlightenment. Advocating for Buddhism, he claimed that Buddhism was the only religion which ensureds the idea of Egalitarianism and Utilitarianism in Indian Society.

Dr. Ambedkar's concept of social justice stands for liberty, equality and fraternity of all human beings. They are consistent with ethical principles of Buddhist Social Work that enrich the value of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. This structure of principles sets the foundation on which all Buddhist social workers should be based. The objective of this study is to examine the Buddhist Social Work ethical principles through Dr. Ambedkar's philosophy that enabled the transformation of an unjust society to a society with social justice.

2. Study Method

This is a qualitative research-based study supported by secondary data extracted from previous academic work. Critical thinking-based analytical approaches were appropriately used in segregating the contents and intent of previous academic literature. The authors' understanding of Buddhist Social Work provided a light in scanning the said contents and bringing the facts together.

3. Three Key Domains: Social Justice, Ethical Principles and Buddhist Social Work

3.1 Social justice

Social justice refers to equal social opportunities being available to everyone to develop their personalities associated with equality and social rights. The issues of social justice have affected various developmental policies as well as the development of social welfare program for the oppressed and weaker sections of society. Social justice strengthens multi-dimensional equity of a society and promotes equal economic and educational, opportunities in the community and in the workplace, as well as ensures the safety and security of individuals. The term "social justice" has become just as prominent as "human rights." It's essentially a concept of fairness within a society. That applies to fairness in wealth, opportunities, basic needs, and more.

Different organizations and institutions define social justice in their own way, through different political, social, economic, and religious perspectives. Therefore, it is difficult to find a single definition for social justice. Professor. D.R. Jatava has defined social justice as "a sort of justice which prescribes certain ideals closely related to human society; it sustains the existence and continuity of the individuals, family, society and the nation; its implementation safeguards the interests of the weaker sections of society; this removes all the serious unjust imbalances found between man and man so that the lives of all the citizens become improved and emancipated. As a result, every man, according to his own potentiality and merit, may avail of the opportunities for acquiring social goals of his own liking and outlook" (Jatava, 2006: P.16). Similarly, the United Nations declared that "Social justice may be broadly understood as the fair and compassionate distribution of the fruits of economic growth." (United Nations, 2006). As per the views of the National Association of Social Workers, "Social justice is the view that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities. Social workers aim to open the doors of access and opportunity for everyone, particularly those in greatest need" (NASW, 2022). The Center for Economic and Social Justice has stated "Social justice encompasses economic justice. Social justice is the virtue which guides us in creating those organized human interactions we call institutions. In turn, social institutions, when justly organized, provide us with access to what is good for the person, both individually and in our associations with others. Social justice also imposes on each of us a personal responsibility to work with others to design and continually perfect our institutions as tools for personal and social development" (CESJ, 2021). Key commonalities observable in these varied definitions for social justice are equal rights, equal opportunity and equal treatment.

The concept of social justice emerged out of the evolutionary process of social norms including social inclusion, order, law, and morality. It place emphasis upon just actions, and creates space for intervention in the society by enforcing rules and regulations based on the principles of social equality. The term 'social justice' consists of two components: one is social and the second is justice. The component 'social' is concerned with all human beings who live in society, while 'justice' is related to liberty, equality and rights. Thus, social justice is concerned with ensuring liberty, providing equality and maintaining individual rights for every human being in society.

Thereby, social justice opens the door for all members of the society to secure the highest possible development of their capabilities.

3.2 Ethical Principles

Ethical principles are part of a normative theory that justifies or defends moral rules or moral judgments; they are not dependent on one's subjective viewpoints. A set of moral values or a personal code of ethics can serve as the guide for judging between right and wrong in our daily life. Ethical behavior can't be defined by one set of actions or moral values. As defined by the Marquette University Business web page; "Ethics is not a matter of factual knowledge in the way that the sciences and other branches of inquiry are. Rather, it has to do with determining the nature of normative theories and applying these sets of principles to practical moral problems" (para 3). Thus, ethics, is the discipline concerned with what is morally good and bad and morally right and wrong.

3.3 Buddhist Social Work

Western-rooted social work is originated from a religious background with philanthropy as its primary core. On the other hand, the foundation of Buddhist Social Work is the Buddhist philosophy based on altruism. Buddhist Social Work can be a profound alternative to the field of social work or it can be applied in combination with Western-rooted Social Work, depending on the characteristics of the society. Buddha's guidance, *"parattam pati pajjata"* or "work for others' well-being or welfare" illuminates a potential definition for Buddhist Social Work. Buddha has also explained that "I am practicing for the welfare and happiness of many people" (Bodhi.*Wassakāra Sutta - NDB).* Buddha's message to Bhikkus, *"Go forth, Bhikkhus, for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the benefit, for the good, for the happiness of gods and men…." (Mahāvagga pāli, Vinaya Pitaka 1)* provides a better structure for a definition of Buddhist Social Work.

The Asian Research Institute for International Social Work, Japan (ARIISW) also focused on defining what Buddhist Social Work is because this was an important educational discussion. A long-term program based a series of on important research which is also a turning point in Buddhist Social Work has led the interested parties to define Buddhist Social Work (BSW) at the conclusion of the project. It is also a major contribution to the progress of Buddhist social work. Thus, an appropriate definition for Buddhist Social Work was agreed upon at the Hanoi International Expert Meeting (HIEM) 2017, under two models, named Model-B and Model-C. The Model-B definition says that *"Buddhist social work is the social work based on the Buddhist philosophy. It helps individuals, families, groups and communities which enhance social functions, and promote their wellbeing, peace, happiness and harmony. It is an academic inter-discipline and a profession; Buddhist Social Work professionals will demonstrate his/her knowledge, skills and values guided by the principles of Buddha nature"* (Akimoto, 2017: p.5) whereas Model–C explains that *"Buddhist social work is a collection of human activities to help other people solve or alleviate life difficulties and problems based on the Buddha nature. Buddhist social work always finds causes to work on in both the material, and social arena, as well as in human, or inner arena, working on both arenas in tandem. Its fundamental principles include compassion, loving kindness, mutual help, interdependency and self-reliance. The central value is the Five Precepts. The ultimate goal is to achieve the well-being of all sentient beings and peace"* (Akimoto, 2017: p.7).

Commenting on the Model-C, the social work scholar Gohori states that "This model works with classical Buddhist terms such as loving kindness or compassion. It's clear that this model is deeply rooted in Buddhist teaching reflecting its core concepts. Asian Buddhist societies inherit these concepts from which some of them are compatible with principles. They underpin the Western-rooted social work definition; however, there is no need to translate them or to interpret them. People in Asia region are already familiar with them and their presence is automatically accepted in Asian Buddhist societies and cultures" (Gohori, 2019: p.112-113). Consequently, the Model-C definition is more aligned with Buddhist social work. "The Buddhist welfare values should be the foundation of Buddhist social work by leveraging Buddhist concepts and practical knowledge" (Ishikawa, 2017). Further, "Buddhist social work is based on the emancipation of mental and physical suffering of humans, protecting living beings, balancing social needs,

sharing wealth and conserving the nature" (Wickramasinghe, 2020: p.140). It implies that Buddhist social work is based on Buddhist philosophy to work for the welfare of others. It is a method of intervening in the problems faced by people through a scientific approach alone or together with western social work.

4. Life of Dr. Ambedkar

Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was a jurist, politician and social reformer who intensively campaigned against caste discrimination and untouchability whilst also standing for the rights of women & the underprivileged. He was the chief architect of the Constitution of India and served as India's first Law and Justice Minister during independence. Born in 1891 to "Dalit" Parents, he is often seen as the Father of the Indian Constitution and "Dalit" Rights Movements.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's life was a crusade for social, economic and political justice for the downtrodden. His life was an action story of suffering, sacrifice and struggle. As a student, lecturer, social thinker and political leader, he faced heavy odds, onslaughts and humiliations. From childhood onwards, he encountered caste tyranny, obscurantism, oppression and unbearable agony. In every stage, Ambedkar rebelled and fought against these pernicious and inhuman facets of Hindu society. Ambedkar had some unique qualities such as courage, conviction, discipline, hard work, deep study, scholarship, single-minded devotion, dedication, sacrifice and selfless service that helped him to carry the message of Buddha to the downtrodden and the oppressed mankind in the country.

4.1 Dr. Ambedkar's Displeasure with the Traditional Social Order

Though Dr. Ambedkar appeared to belong to the same tradition of social thinkers and reformers, his contributions are different from most of others in an important way. Unlike many others, Dr. Ambedkar vehemently and directly attacked the Hindu social philosophy inculcated in traditional Indian society by highlighting its contribution to the social injustice and oppression loaded upon the weaker community. He emphasized the need to form a new society where social justice was the norm so as to ensure the amelioration of the downtrodden and backward classes. He was sure

that a just social order would go a long way in making the citizens aware of their rights, duties and responsibilities and promoting the spirit of nationalism and patriotism among the people.

5. Discussion

5.1 Dr. Ambedkar's Principles & Strengths

Dr. Ambedkar advocated three actions: educate, organize and agitate. Indeed, the first principle will provide rational thought, the second will give mental/physical strength and the third principle will lead to fight for human rights. On the Indian continent, after 'Buddha' he was the only scholar who had raised questions against the traditional views and conservatism, much like Socrates. Naturally, Dr. Ambedkar has left a permanent impression as a great patriot both in regards to the Indian Constitution as well as social life. He proclaimed that *"So long as we have these differences of Hindu, Muslim and others, or Sindhi, Madrasi etc, we can never develop our nationality"* (Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014). His life history is well presented by scholars: *"The life history of Dr. Ambedkar epitomized the relentless struggle of downtrodden community in our country against social ostracism and economic oppression"* (Paton, 1964: p.134). The direction of his principles is further elaborated *"He had rare ability to reduce the most complex questions to simple terms. He was a man of strong likes and dislikes: His mind was basically logical with will power of penetrating analysis and a gift of clever thinking. Dr. Ambedkar was so energetic and had such a strong will that he faced every eventuality with courage and determination. Like a valiant fighter he always went forward and never looked backward. He had immense organizing capacity, a tribute to his strength as well as will power. He was not daunted and discouraged by any difficulties and danger. He maintained the same energy and resolutions under all circumstances"* (Gopal 1994: pp.76-90).

Dr. Ambedkar had many degrees to his credit, and his pilgrimage in search of knowledge sent him to far-flung countries such as United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany. He studied thousands of books on all subjects which made him an ocean of knowledge and wisdom. No wonder, the Indian universities felt small and shy before him. Dr. Ambedkar as a scholar had conferred upon him the honorary degrees of L.L.D. and D.Litt., by the Columbia University, New York (U.S.A) and the Osmania University, Hyderabad (India) respectively.

5.2 Dr. Ambedkar's Ideology of the Caste System

Dr. Ambedkar critically evaluated the caste system by elaborating its origin and genesis. According to him *"Endogamy is an essential trait of the caste system. Rather the rule of endogamy is responsible for the caste system"* (Ambedkar, 2014: pp.3-22). Dr. Ambedkar made strong arguments against the caste system. The caste system has been enmeshed in the structure and constitutive elements of the Hindu society. By creating a hierarchical social system, it divided the society into four castes which were arranged in a hierarchical way. Social, religious and economic status of the individual in this system was determined on the basis of the caste in which he was born such that an individual, though capable, did not have any right to change his status. Besides, the relations among the members of the society were fixed and determined. Although the caste system presented a systematic and well-organized social design, he was very critical about the place given to positive human values in the caste system. *"The caste system did not allow positive human values to play any role. Consequently, there was no mobility, no progress, no unity and integration in Indian society. While critically evaluating the caste system, Dr. Ambedkar not only argued against the structure of Hindu society but also against the principle on which the caste system was built"* (Ambedkar, 2014: pp. 3-22). Dr. Ambedkar argued that the caste system had created problems for the unity and integrity of India. Due to the ban on inter-caste marriage and co-dining people did not have an opportunity to come together and exchange their thoughts. Besides, there was separation between castes which was not conducive to the feeling of oneness. Consequently, there was no unity and integrity among them. According to Dr. Ambedkar, the social structure lacked social cohesion, and the country had been quite vulnerable to external aggression.

5.3 Dr. Ambedkar's Acceptance of a Buddhism-Based Social System as an Alternative to the Hindu Social System

Dr. Ambedkar was motivated to explore a better religion-rooted philosophy that hads the potential to establish social equality and justice. After studying many religions over two decades, he embraced Buddhism since he was convinced that a Buddhist philosophy-based approach was

the best alternative to promote peace and social justice. Ambedkar has said; *"By discarding my ancient religion which stood for inequality and oppression today I am reborn, I have no faith in the philosophy of incarnation; and it is wrong and mischievous to say that Buddha was an incarnation of Vishnu. I am no more a devotee of any Hindu god or goddess. I will not perform Shrardha. I will strictly follow the eight-fold path of Buddha. Buddhism is a true religion and I will lead a life guided by the three principles of knowledge, right path and compassion"* (Larbeer, 2003). He further proclaimed that, *"The world owes much to rebels who would dare to argue in the face of the polite and insist that he is not infallible. I do not care for the credit, which every progressive society must give to its rebels. I shall be satisfied if I make the Hindus realize that they are the sick men of India and that their sickness is causing danger to the health and happiness of other Indians"* (Larbeer, 2003). Ambedkar valued the following principles embedded in the ideology of Buddha:

- The rational consciousness of assessing things for a better life of human beings.
- The freedom of choice in which man realizes his individual dignity.
- The realization of the higher life by transcending the lower plane of human existence.
- The revolt against suppression and enslavement of humanity.
- The entire change of traditional patterns of society to providing physical facilities for all.
- The emancipation of ignored humanity and the revitalization of overlooked reality.

5.4 Congruence of Dr. Ambedkar's Ideology with Buddhist Social Work

Buddhist social workers empower individuals and groups to influence social policies and institutions and promote social justice. Social workers advocate for change to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources and opportunities required to meet basic needs and thereafter, develop fully. Primarily, in Buddhism, two concepts of justice can be seen; one is universal and the other is social. The former, based on the Buddha's teachings on karma, states that a moral law exists and governs the realization of sequences of behavior in proportion to their deeds. Some scholars have criticized it: *"This law functions dynamically and causally beyond*

human's understandings. Descriptive orientation and theoretical complexity of the teachings impede its explanatory and evaluative application to social relations" (Boonnoon, 2018: pp. 36-93). The latter, founded on the Buddha's sociopolitical teachings, focuses on immediate life situations. Believing that individuals and society, as well as citizens and state-power structure, are interrelated; and that "humans desire a good life that is made possible in a just society" Buddhism employs basic human features as its main criteria for an arrangement of systems to distribute rewards and punishments.

There are ten Buddhist Social Work principles which are compatible with social justice. They are human dignity, community and the common good, rights and responsibilities, priority for the poor and vulnerable, participation, dignity of work and the rights of workers, solidarity, stewardship, governance/subsidiarity, and promotion of peace. These principles which were congruent with the sociopolitical needs enmeshed in Dr. Ambedkar's ideology inspired him to lay the appropriate foundation for an essential social change where the social justice is the norm.

The ethical foundation of a moral society assures the dignity of each person. The measure of every ethical institution is based on whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person. Buddhist social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of all individuals. They are treat each person in a caring, respectful manner, and are mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity. Buddhist social workers seek to promote the responsiveness of organizations, communities and social institutions to individuals needs and social problems. Buddhist social workers act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person or group on any basis. All the characteristics related to the construction of social justice are seen in Dr. Ambedkar, who looked at it from the perspective of Buddhist social work as a whole.

6. Conclusion

Dr. Ambedkar as a child experienced the pains of the social oppression which prevailed in the Hindu social system. Moving through suffering, and challenging the status quo, he emerged as a highly respected scholar who commenced a struggle to transform Hindu society in-to a society with social justice. Becoming a top intellectual personality, Dr. Ambedkar logically understood

the cause of the issue and identified the Buddhism-based philosophical approach as the required ethical foundation to improve the social order and promote social justice. He became the chief architect of the Constitution of India, and took steps to lay the ethical foundation for a moral society.

Dr. Ambedkar valued the social justice-friendly teachings embedded in the ideology of Buddha. The rational consciousness of assessing things, freedom of choice to work towards one's own dignity, and the emancipation of ignored humanity and the revitalization of overlooked reality are some of them. The moral essence of these ideas and the other philosophical values contained in the Buddhism-based ideology were well aligned with Dr. Ambedkar's social justice structure, which is based on liberty, equality and fraternity. Buddhist Social Work which has the potential to either replace Western-rooted social work or be implemented along with Western-rooted social work according to the nature of the society, also shares the same ethical foundation and values.

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