

# Quick Reflection on Reading "Buddha or Karl Marx" by Dr B.R. Ambedkar

-Aloke Mukherjee

When one of the greatest thinkers, a famous social and political reformer, of modern India makes a comparative study of two undoubtedly greatest ideological-philosophical guides of humanity of their respective times even though separated by nearly 2400 years, it draws attraction to the serious activists forcing them to reflect upon it. Here is one quick reflection from Marxist activist. Dr B.R. Ambedkar, a scholar extraordinaire, had at first put forward his understanding about the basic tenets of Buddha and Marx in brief. Then he went on to make a comparison between the two. But though at the outset he pointed out that the two Greats were separated by 2381 years, he failed to take into account that it was not just the number of years they were separated as individuals but also the long period mankind had travelled through different stages and phases of history as well as different forms of human society. This had an important bearing on his understanding of both Buddha and Marx and consequently on his conclusion. Without acknowledgement of these facts such comparison leads to, what they say, mixing up between chalk and cheese.

## **Dr Ambedkar's Confused Understanding on Buddha :**

1. Gautama Buddha lived in a period of great importance in the social history of India, especially in the part Buddha was born, lived, attained Bodhi, preached his dhamma and met his death. From 600 BC to 300 BC the area around Gangetic plains faced large scale deforestation to pave the way for settled agriculture and mining. The tribal society with its elected chief had to yield to the emerging ruthless centralized states. The start was in the early years of Buddha, when Bimbisara became the king. With the centralized state, society also had taken a structure for the enhancement of productive forces, Varna division arose replacing tribal equality. Buddha was born in 563 BC and lived for 80 years. Bimbisara started the Haryanka dynasty which developed Magadh empire in 544 BC. Buddha had seen the empire building process. He had seen ruthless state powers arising on the ruins of tribal societies. Buddha himself was born in a family of tribal chieftom of Shakya tribe. During his life time, Vidhudava, the Prince of Kosala, conquered and carried brutal massacre of the Shakyas. Probably this led to Buddha saying: "...the kings who rule kingdoms rich in treasures and wealth, turn their greed against one another, pandering insatiable to their desires. If these acts thus restlessly, swimming in the stream of impermanence, carried along by greed and carnal desires, who then can walk on earth in peace?" [Quoted by Debiprasad Chattopadhyay, Indian Philosophy, p128] Without taking

this into account any attempt to discuss Buddha's life and teachings will be superficial. In this discourse Dr Ambedkar made that mistake.

2. Dr Ambedkar has enumerated the tenets of Buddha in a nutshell. Though said that he reached that idea 'from' his 'reading of the Tripitaka, his understanding was grossly misleading. To Buddha, Dhamma is different from European and other Religions, even Brahminical Dharma. To Buddha Dhamma is the way the life is to be spent with the objective of extinction of suffering (dukkha) and release from conditional existence; whereas European religion is fundamentally surrender to a Supreme Being to achieve the same objective, the reason of which has been explained most aptly by Karl Marx. According to Buddha 'consciousness arises out of conditions; there is no arising of consciousness without conditions' (Magatanhsankhaya Sutta). This is a materialist concept of the relationship between matter and consciousness. This philosophical approach took him to the understanding of Four Noble Truths: a) there is suffering (dukkha) in life, b) the cause of suffering is desire, c) ending of desire means ending of suffering, d) following a controlled and moderate lifestyle will end desires and therefore end suffering. This is the quintessence of tenets of Buddha. It means, according to Buddha the process does not stop at arising consciousness out of conditions, but also consciousness can act upon the conditions. Thus, Buddha expressed dialectical relationship between consciousness and conditions. This is what Buddha meant by his precept: "The function of Religion is to reconstruct the world and to make it happy...". But Dr Ambedkar misinterpreted it as an idealist concept irrespective of conditions. We shall later discuss the lacuna of Dr Ambedkar's understanding of Buddha's philosophy and also, if possible, the influence of idealism in Buddha's dialectical approach though starting from a material base.

3. Dr Ambedkar emphasized a particular teaching of Buddha: Worth and not birth is the measure of a man. According to Buddha: "Not by birth does one become outcaste, not by birth one becomes brahmana. By one's action one become an outcaste, by one's action one becomes a Brahman". [Vesala Sutta quoted in Guide to Tripitaka, compiled by U Ko Lay, Buddha Dharma Education Association Inc., p138] From this Dr Ambedkar made an ahistorical sweeping remark, without going to the depth, confusing a 'democrat' at Buddha's period and a 'democrat' at the period of Marx and later. Otherwise, he could find that even Buddha used discriminating standards against women. Dr Ambedkar had talked much about the bhikkhus, but remained silent about the bhikkhunis. Let us find out the conditions of admission into the order of bhikkhus for women laid down by Buddha. When after his Enlightenment Buddha visited his birthplace Kapilavastu, his foster mother Mahapajapati (Ambedkar mistakenly referred to her as Buddha's mother in a different context) requested him to admit her along with five hundred Sakyan ladies into his Order. Buddha did not allow them. After death of Buddha's father, Suddodhana, she along with those five hundred ladies went all the way to Vaishali to join Buddha's Order. Buddha had still been opposing their admission. Finally, one of his main disciples Ananda persuaded Buddha to admit them by reminding him that Mahapajapati had been the person who after the death of his mother, Jogmaya, raised Buddha suckling him. Even then Buddha agreed

only if Mahapajapati accepted the 8 rules laid down by him for the bhikkhunis. We are mentioning only two of them for brevity to understand its undemocratic patriarchal essence if judged by today's standard.

- i) A bhikkhuni, even if she enjoys seniority of a hundred years in the Order, must pay respect to a bhikkhu though he may have been a bhikkhu for a day.
- ii) A bhikkhuni must abide by the instructions given to her by bhikkhus, but must not give instructions or advice to bhikkhus.

So when Dr. Ambedkar, irrespective of the social conditions present at the time of Buddha, depicts him that "he was born a democrat and he died a democrat" he forgets the reality under which Buddha preached his Dhamma. Buddha's Dhamma was really a protest. Protest against the change in political economic as well as social order where taxation, slavery, extortion, torture, mortgage, usury, dislike for manual work, above all Varna divisions that arose as specific of India where with the development of productive forces new areas were conquered, the indigenous people, different tribes were drawn into the victor's society, assimilated and put into lower order of society. These new institutions brought unheard of miseries in the lives of people who lived in a condition of tribal equality. Buddha sought remedies from those miseries and tried to remove the causes of miseries. His was a protest, not a revolt to change the social order imposed upon the people forcibly or not. It was not historically possible for Buddha to promote a path of radical change in that condition. His object was extinction of suffering (misery, dukkha) and release from the conditional existence. At the beginning he wished to achieve it through meditation with the Eightfold Noble Path [1. Right belief, 2. Right resolve, 3. Right speech, 4. Right conduct, 5. Right occupation, 6. Right effort, 7. Right mindfulness, 8. Right samadhi] and practice of five Silas [abstaining from killing, abstaining from stealing, abstaining from sexual misconduct, abstaining from telling lies, abstaining from alcoholic drinks, drugs, or intoxicants that becloud the mind].

So, in the beginning recitation of Buddham Sharanam Gachchhami /Dhammam Sharanam Gachchhami "was the formula of declaration of faith in the Buddha and his Teachings. It was essentially a path of personal practice of individuals to get rid of miseries. Later when Sangha became established, the formula was extended to include the third commitment: Sangham Sharanam Gachchhami." [U Ko Lay, Guide to Tripitaka, p35] Why did this extension take place? Because Buddha found that the protest should be a collective affair. Collectively to go out of the society that brings sufferings (pabajja) and to aver at (upasampada) sanghas, modelled consciously on tribal collectives. From the four Noble Truths, Five Silas and Eightfold Path it is clear that they altogether had strong individualistic components to be practiced. To make it stronger as protest, Sanghas were established. But the collectives were not centres for establishing democratic structure in the society as a whole. Rather for the society at large it was limited to appeals to the kings to rule based on Dhamma, a utopian proposition. It needed a high degree of imagination to think that as Dr Ambedkar said: "The means to bring about communism which the Buddha propounded

were quite definite". But when the issue is extended to comparing Buddha with Marx, it seems something more in the exercise than wishful thinking or imagination hidden in it.

### **Dr Ambedkar's Understanding on Marx :**

Now let us find out how Dr Ambedkar looked at Marx. As great scholar and leading social scientist Dr Ambedkar has perfectly presented that: "By scientific socialism what Marx meant was that his brand of socialism was inevitable and inescapable and that society was moving towards it and nothing could prevent its march". But after that in his attempt to oversimplify basic tenets of Marx he has proved that his knowledge about Marx and Marxism was superficial. Let us have a look at it.

1. The very first point he wrote as Marx's thesis is: "That the purpose of philosophy is to reconstruct the world and not to explain the origin of the universe". What did Marx say in his famous sentence is as follows: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways, the point is to change it". Interpreting the world in different ways cannot be construed as "explaining the origin of universe". To confuse them is nothing but gross misunderstanding of Marx and Marxism.

2. Then Dr Ambedkar said that according to Marx, "The forces which shapes the course of history is primarily economic". This is also oversimplified understanding of Marx's ideas. Marx has very clearly expressed that: "History is nothing but the activity of men in pursuit of their ends". [Holy Family, quoted in the Selected Writings in Sociology and Social philosophy, Karl Marx, edited by TB Bottomore and Maximilien Rubel, Penguin Books, p78]. TRUE, men cannot carry on the activity according to their sweet will. That part has also been explained by Marx, "In the development of productive forces a stage is reached where productive forces and means of intercourse are called into being which, under the existing relations, can only work mischief, and which are, therefore, no longer productive, but destructive, forces (machinery and money). [German Ideology, ibid, p79]. When such material condition is associated with the emergence of a class which act to change the condition, history is made. Thats why in the Manifesto of the Communist Party Marx declares: "The history of all hitherto existing societies is history of class struggles". To him the exploiters and exploited from the time of Buddha till today are same in character, so it will be sufficient to differentiate the classes as "owners and workers".

3. As a consequence he put "That society is divided into two classes, owners and workers", irrespective of stages of history they belong. He forgot that owners were not same in character at different periods of history, changing from slave owners, feudal lords and capitalists, for examples. Similarly exploited people also took different characters like slaves, serfs and industrial workers. There were different modes of extraction of surplus labour of the exploited people at different modes of production.

4. This superficial understanding continued. We are not going to detail out them, but only point out where he grossly erred in his view about Marx. He said, according to Marx: "That as the workers outnumber the owners, the workers are bound to capture the State and

establish their rule which he called dictatorship of the proletariat.” But Marx’s actual opinion can be clearly understood from a little longer quotation from his famous writing, German Ideology:

(1) In the development of productive forces, a stage is reached where productive forces and means of intercourse are called into being, which, under the existing relations, can only work mischief, and which are therefore, no longer productive, but destructive, forces (machinery and money). Associated with this is the emergence of a class which has to bear all burdens of society without enjoying its advantages, which is excluded from society and forced into the most resolute opposition to all other classes; a class which comprises the majority of the members of society and in which there develops a consciousness of the need for a fundamental revolution, the communist consciousness. This consciousness can, of course, also arise in other classes from the observation of the situation of this class.

(2) The conditions under which determinate productive forces can be used are also the conditions for the dominance of a determinate social class, whose social power, derived from its property ownership, invariably finds its practical and ideal expression in a particular form of the States. Consequently, every revolutionary struggle is directed against the class which has so far been dominant.

(3) In all former revolutions the form of activity was always left unaltered and it was only be a question of redistributing this activity among different people, of introducing a new division of labour. The communist revolution, however, is directed against the former mode of activity, does away with labour, and abolishes all class rule along with the classes themselves, because it is affected by the class which no longer counts as a class in society, which is not recognised as a class, and which is expression of the dissolution of all classes, nationalities etc., within contemporary society.

(4) For the creation on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, as well as for the success of the cause itself, it is necessary for men themselves to be changed in a large scale, and this change can only occur in a practical movement, in a revolution. Revolution is necessary not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because only in a revolution can the class which overthrows it rid itself of the accumulated rubbish of the past and become capable of reconstructing society”. [ibid, p79-80] This is enough to make it clear that Dr Ambedkar’s effort to compare Buddha and Marx, and to choose between them is misleading. Even his understanding on both Buddha and Marx, without acknowledging the particular period they lived, and then to choose between them is misleading and obfuscate by premeditation.

### **Where Did Dr Ambedkar Err?**

He has correctly pointed out that, according to Buddha, ‘avarice’, greed or desire for wealth were the root cause of miseries. But he has put some notions as Buddha’s, which were completely wrong and Buddha had not thought like that. For example, he has said: “As to the Buddha’s own attitude towards class conflict, his doctrine of Ashtanga Marga

recognises that class conflict exists and that it is the class conflict which is the cause of misery”.

But at the time of Buddha there was no concept of ‘class’, let alone class conflict. What were the Ashtanga Marga? It can be stated as follows: 1) Right belief, 2) Right resolve, 3) Right speech, 4) Right conduct, 5) Right occupation, 6) Right effort 7) Right mindfulness, 8) Right samadhi or meditation. These were to be practiced by individuals. From this it will be wrong to construe that Ashtanga Marga recognised “class conflict” or “that it is the class conflict which is the cause of misery”. According to Buddha, as we have earlier mentioned that the cause of misery is ‘greed’ and ‘avarice’, which give rise to desires. Later Sanghas were established to differentiate his path from the metaphysical wisdom, and the Sanghas were modelled on the tribal collective as parallel to the Varna divided society at large. So, it was a matter of protest against the developing social system based on Varna. Even if the organisation of Sanghas is conceded as Buddha’s consciousness of class conflict, Dr Ambedkar could present no proof that Buddha had or tried to have taken a side in the class conflict. Rather Buddha had appealed to the exploiters, kings, to be benevolent, that is what he meant by Dhamma Chakra. This was the basis of ahimsa, preached by Buddha. In that period when the old order was yielding to a new order, tribal equality was being forced to the new kingdoms basing on Varna division, nothing more could have been done. The development of productive forces would not allow him to do any more. This clarifies where had Dr Ambedkar erred when he said, “The means of bringing about communism which the Buddha propounded was quite definite. “Because from Buddha’s teachings we know that consciousness comes from the conditions of life; so, at the time of Buddha only the idea of tribal egalitarianism and equanimity could be conceived as opposed to formation of empire and social divisions based on Varna system. It was not possible to conceive of communism then. This has already been clarified in the paragraph 2 of quotation from German Ideology by Karl Marx. Actually, Dr Ambedkar has done great disservice to both Buddha and Marx by pitting one against other the two Great Teachers of the oppressed people of their times.

### **Why did Dr Ambedkar go for such an Exercise to Pit Buddha and Marx Against each Other?**

Perhaps this is one of the weakest wrongs by the great scholar and thinker, Dr B.R. Ambedkar. He has written this article in accordance to his concepts and world outlook. His world outlook is completely different from Karl Marx’s outlook. What caused him to take up this exercise of comparing Buddha and Marx? To understand it we must know when did Ambedkar write this article. Dr Ambedkar converted to Buddhism on 14 October 1956 and died on December 6 of the same year. He completed his manuscript of the article, “Buddha or Karl Marx”, just four days before his death on 2 December 1956. This fact clarifies that he was in a hurry to explain to his followers why he embraced Buddhism. Although around March 1956 as a preparatory exercise he completed his manuscript THE BUDDHA AND HIS DHAMMA, which was published post-humously. He needed a short article to clarify his position. He had to clarify why he did embrace Buddhism instead of Marxism.

To be TRUE, in the last years of his life the great personality was not a happy man, failing to achieve what he fought for throughout his life. He was the person who way back in 1916 clearly stated that Manu did not create the castes. He declared: "One thing I want to impress upon you is that Manu did not give the law of caste and he could not do so. Caste existed long before Manu. He was an upholder of it and therefore philosophised about it, but certainly he did not and could not ordain the present order of Hindu society. His work ended with the codification existing caste rules and the preaching of Caste Dharma". [CASTES IN INDIA, Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development; paper read at Columbia University, New York, 9 May 1916; from Indian Antiquary, May 1917, vol XLI, P 16]

We can refer to Marx on this question: "Under the patriarchal system, under caste system, and under feudal guild system, there was admission of labour in society as a whole according to fixed rules. Were these rules established by a legislator? No. They were born, originally from the conditions of material production and only much later were they established as laws. It is thus these various forms of the division of labour became so many bases of social organisation". [Quoted from Poverty of Philosophy, Karl Marx, Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy, edited by TB Bottomore and Maximilien Rubel, p105] This shows Dr Ambedkar was closer to Marx than most of the ideologies. On the same paper he asserted that, "...at the outset ...Hindu society, in common with other societies, was composed of classes and earliest known are (1) Brahmans or the priestly class; (2) the Kshatriyas, or the military class; (3) the Vaishyas, the merchant class; and (4) the Sudra, or the artisan and menial class". [Castes in India..., p17-18]. He then discussed how the caste system evolved and said: "This subdivision of a society is quite natural. But the unnatural thing about these subdivisions is that they have lost the open-door character of the class system and have become self-enclosed units called castes." [ibid, p18] But he lost clue about how could the Varna division which was a type of class division become caste division. His explanation was that the Brahmans at first got themselves secluded into a caste, then others followed suit. The Vaishyas and Sudras as "inchoate plasm" got divided according to occupations. In his explanation the contradiction between productive forces and relation of production had no place. So, in his understanding, though he defined 'caste' as 'closed class', abolition of caste was not connected with the change in existing production relations. This difference created a big gap between Dr Ambedkar and Marxists. Both, Dr Ambedkar and the Marxists of India turned out as contenders to win over the oppressed caste people, since both were working for abolition of castes. Their policies differed. While Ambedkar believed his objective could be fulfilled democratically through constitutional means, Marxist felt abolition of caste like abolition of class can be achieved through revolutionary change in society. Here we are limiting ourselves to the theoretical understanding only, not evaluating practical activities of both the sides on this question.

However, Dr Ambedkar was not opposed to class struggle, while many of his present-day followers try to make people believe the opposite. The founder of the first trade union in India, Bombay Millhands Union, Narayan Lokhande was a follower of Ambedkar. Ambedkar himself was directly associated with trade union movement. He was leader of the peasant

struggle against Khots. He had even formed party, Independent Labour Party to connect the oppressed castes with the labour movement as a whole. Throughout his life he tried to advance the cause of the oppressed castes (in his vocabulary 'Depressed Classes') through constitutional means using legal procedures. So, when he was elected to the Constituent Assembly the sophisticated ruling classes led by Nehru tried to assimilate him to ruling class first by making him Law Minister, and then the Chairman of the Drafting Committee for the Constitution of India. In the Constituent Assembly, while discussing the Draft Constitution he had more than often expressed that the Constitution was assuring political equality. (according to him 'one man one vote'), but not economic and social equality. He even warned that if that contradiction is not resolved there would be a Soviet type of revolution. All these and the role of Soviet Union against fascism created a positive impression about Soviet Marxists among the followers of Dr Ambedkar. He was aware of it. Moreover, he could not be assimilated into the Congress. So, after the Constitution was passed, he was pushed to the side. And he faced the worst experience in his life in the 1952 General Election. He had to contest from Bombay North Constituency as a candidate of the Scheduled Castes Association. His opponents were from the Congress, the CPI and the Hindu Mahasabha. The Congress candidate Narayan Sadoba Kajrolkar, who himself was an assistant to Dr Ambedkar, and also from a backward caste, won the election. Dr Ambedkar came fourth in the race. It was a result that surprised all Indians. He lost again when he contested a by-election the same year from Bhandara. These had a tremendous effect on him. He found that he had a limited, almost no scope to utilise the constitutional method. As a constitutional democrat he had strong reservation with the communists. He started searching for some other method. FINALLY, HE OPTED TO CONVERT TO BUDDHISM WHICH FROM ITS ORIGIN HAD NO PLACE FOR CASTE DIVISION. BUT AS A LEADER OF THE DEPRESSED CLASSES HE FACED A PROBLEM. SINCE THE COMMUNISTS WERE ALSO PROPAGATING AGAINST CASTEISM, MOREOVER THE ROLE OF SOVIET UNION IN DEFEATING FASCISM AND SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION OF CHINESE REVOLUTION HAD POSITIVE IMPACT ON HIS FOLLOWERS, HE HAD TO EXPLAIN HIS POSITION TO HIS FOLLOWERS TO STOP THEM SHIFTING THEIR LOYALTY TOWARDS THE VIEWS OF MARX. SO, THIS WAS A DESPERATE ATTEMPT BY A DISHEARTENED GENIUS. HE HAD TO DEFEND HIS UNDEFENDABLE ACTION BY PITTING BUDDHA AGAINST MARX BEFORE DEATH STOPPED HIS SEARCH FOR A CONCRETE PATH FOR THE ABOLITION OF CASTE.

The article conveys Dr B.R. Ambedkar's understanding of political and social concepts and his world outlook. Nevertheless, his contribution to the society and Indian people cannot be refused or neglected. He will remain in the hearts of Indian downtrodden people.