

AMBEDKAR AND ECOLOGY: A STUDY OF BUDDHA AND HIS DHARMA

V.M. RAVI KUMAR* & ARVIND SWAROOP**

ABSTRACT

Environmental conservation emerged as duty of entire humanity. The prosperity and survival of the planet Earth critically depended upon human efforts to save it. This paper concentrates on ecological dimension of Dr. Ambedkar, who happens to be one of the great intellectual of modern era. It has been proposed that the philosophy of Ambedkar embedded with understanding on the human environmental relationship and devised several strategies to mitigate the exploitation of nature by human beings at one level and human beings by human beings at another level. This paper concentrate on ideas and strategies of Ambedkar related to environment and highlights the solutions he offers to minimise exploitation of nature.

Key Words: *Nature, Dharma, Environmentalism, Ambedkar, Caste, Water, Untouchables, History, Inclusiveness.*

INTRODUCTION

This paper proposes that the life world of Ambedkar consisting of ideas and activities embedded finer understanding of human environmental relationship. The main argument this paper is that the ideas of Ambedkar quite useful for situating equality at the centre stage of environmental discourses and strategies. Particularly, Ambedkar's representation of Buddha and his Dharma proposes universal dimension of inclusive and ethical dimension of human life. This domain also encompass the relationship between biotic and a biotic world at one level and human beings and nature at another level. The main objective of this paper is to capture ecological dimension of Ambedkar's thought with special reference to his idea of Buddha and his Dharma.

*Assistant Professor, Department of History, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Lucknow

** Research Scholar, Department of History, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Lucknow

This paper has been organised into four sections: first section deals with conceptual framework for locating the thought of Ambedkar in the domain of ecology: second section narrates the engagement of Ambedkar with ecologically important resources with particular reference to livelihoods of Dalits: third section documents ecological dimension of Buddha and Dharma of Ambedkar and final section proposes potentiality of Ambedkar thought for addressing the environmental issues from the prescriptive of marginalised sections of Indian society.

I. AMBEDKAR AND GREEN DISCOURSE

Ecology generally means a study of relationship between interaction between living species with non-living entities at one level and interaction between human beings and nature at another level. Following this line of thinking, if we look at ideas and activities of Ambedkar we would notice explicit and implicit reflections on ecological dimension of human engagement with nature. The ideas of Ambedkar are capable of making environmentalism more sensitive to the issue of equity. The connection between the ideas of Ambedkar and environmentalism is useful to track the relationship between social exclusion and environmental crisis. The ecological dimension of Ambedkar can be conceptualised with the help of concepts borrowed from intellectual environmental history, which focus on engagement of philosophers, poets, politicians and activists with environmental thought and activism (Mcneil, 2003, Wroster, 1977).

The existing literature on intellectual environmental history in India mainly focused on M.K. Gandhi. The philosophy of Gandhi has been represented as representative of oriental politico-environmental thought and activism (Guha and Alier (1998) and should be incorporated in the policies of environmental management (Shiva, and Bandyopadhyaya, 1985). The nationalist romantic thought exercised significant impact upon natural resource management policies and attitudes in India. Village communities have been treated as ideal and egalitarian entities. Policies such as watershed management, forest management, etc are designed with this assumption. The implementation process of these reforms requires inclusive participation of all stakeholders and equitable distribution of benefits. It is at this stage that this reform process unable to bring out substantial changes. This predicament is termed by some studies as problems of second generation reforms in the domain of natural resources management policy process (Adhikari and Faloo, 2008). Impact social divisions on policy performance are being identified as one of the main reasons for underperformance. Hence it is imperative for Indian environmental discourse to incorporate the ideas of Dalit intellectuals who advocated for inclusive Indian society based upon the principles of equity (Sharma, 2012: 50) in general and Ambedkar in particular.

II. ECOLOGY AND AMBEDKAR

The foundational argument of Ambedkar is that India should become a modern nation. He articulated that socio-economic, cultural and political institutions and practices that are not compatible with the norms of modernity need either to be transformed or reformed. His critique of caste and Brahmanism need to be seen in this perspective. Ambedkar also pointed out that socio-economic conditions in rural India not conducive for development of millions of untouchables in particular and marginalised sections in general.

In his critique of Indian social system in general and caste system in particular, Ambedkar proposed that the Brahmanical world view was one of the important factors that excluded untouchable castes from a meaningful life. While critiquing the nationalist eulogy of Indian civilisation he argued that: ‘What does this civilisation offer to the 25 million of Primitive Tribes who are living on its frontiers? What does it offer to 5 million of Criminal Tribes who living in the midst of that civilisation? What does it offer to the 50 millions of Untouchables who not only living in the midst of that civilisation which has made no effort to adopt them in its field’ (Ambedkar, 2014: 138). Ambedkar thus locates alienation of untouchables and other marginalised sections of Indian society from access to natural resources in the nature of civilisational process in India.

While analysing the reasons why Untouchables remained to be poor in rural India, Ambedkar proposed that systematic exclusion operates with precision to exclude Untouchables. He analysed that Untouchables are excluded from access to land by dominant communities of villages, Untouchable were also prohibited from gaining meaningful and respectable livelihoods by village system dominated by Hindu life world. Only occupations thrown open to them were filthy and degraded such a begging and scavenging. The point Ambedkar emphasised that Untouchable communities are excluded from resources of nature by dominant social groups and even colonial state prohibited them from gaining access to land. For Ambedkar thus mismanaged political economy of the state at one level and hierarchal social system at another level excluded Untouchables from a meaningful life by the way of alienating them from nature.

Ambedkar was of the opinion that the resource of nature should be accessible to all sections of population. He believes that such a condition may lead to evolution of egalitarian society. He consistently advocated that the state should play a vital role in distribution of resources, particularly of land. He suggested strategies such as migration of untouchables to irrigated areas, and distribution of forest and waste lands as a means to provide ownership. He proposed that government can play a crucial role by allocating lands for Dalits. On this issue his suggestions as follows: ‘The most important thing on which Government ought to concentrate is the giving of land to the

Scheduled Castes. They must be settled on land so that they might obtain independent means of livelihood, cease to be afraid of anybody, walk with their heads erect and live fearlessly and courageously. I think this is a thing which all the Ministers are agreed upon'. (Thorat and Kumar, 364). He made land distribution to Dalits as an issue to be handled by the Government.

III. MORALITY, ENVIRONMENT AND AMBEDKAR

Environmental historians in India obsessed with preservationist discourse and invoked romantic preservationist ideas from Brahminical scriptures and practices. The main agenda of these ideas is that to provide conceptual structure to the multiple patterns of resource use under the framework of Hindu culture. By invoking ideas of Buddha Ambedkar constructs the concept of egalitarian environmentalism, which is an anti-thesis to romantic Hindu environmentalism. It means that resources of nature are not meant for few rather for all. And all human beings possess equal right to use the resources of nature. In the ethical domain of relationship between man and nature, Ambedkar moves close to the ideas of Marx who believes in the idea that eco-equality, which in a way means all human beings are equal in relation to nature and resource it offer.

We can capture the ideas of Ambedkar on the bio-centric equality in his engagement with Buddhism. The monumental text *Buddha and his Dharma* starts with an analysis on the process of transformation of Siddhartha Gautama as Buddha. For Ambedkar it happened in the context of Gautama's attempt to find a solution to water disputes between the Sakhyas and the Koloyas the tribal confederation of ancient India. The decision of the Sakhyas to undertake war against enemies was stiffly opposed by Gautama. For Ambedkar, consequent of failure of Buddha in solving the problem, chosen the path of self-exile. It is explicit here is that the character of Buddha in Ambedkar vision of Buddhism emerges from ecologically sensitive resources such as water (Ambedkar, 2006: 28-29). Engagement of Ambedkar for ecological justice with the character of Buddha could be seen at three levels: the conception of evolution of nature: the relationship between human beings and other living forms and finally the ethical aspects of human ecology.

While reviewing the process of genesis of the world in the philosophical tradition of Indian thought, he put forwarded Buddha's version of nature. For Ambedkar biotic world does not have superior and inferior rather 'all individual things are analogues one to another and therefore, no one can be regarded as the final sources to other'. This means all living forms in the world mutually depended upon each other for survival. This concept is closely linked with eco-biological concept of food chain. This concept also reflects the social philosophy of

Ambedkar i.e, importance of all social class to the broader social system. Ambedkar thus propose the concept of socio-ecological egalitarianism, which facilitate the thought process of inclusive environmentalism.

Another interesting aspect of Neo-Buddhism (Ambedkar Buddhism) address is that the relationship among human beings and between living forms and human beings. The main crux of Buddhist Dharma according to Ambedkar is engagement of ‘man and the relation of man to man in his life on earth’ (Ambedkar, 2006: 121). By invoking Buddhist Dharma, Ambedkar was addressing two things: reflection on the iniquitous social order wherein powerful sections exploit nature for selfish class and caste interests and secondly, visualising his dream society i.e., society free from exploitation and deprivation. Neo-Buddhism does not satisfy with harmonious relationship between human beings and it also proposes organic relationship with all living forms. Ambedkar invoked Buddha to reflect upon this aspect, which is as follows: ‘Love is not enough; what is required is Maitri. It is wider than love. It means fellowship not merely with human beings but with all living beings. Is not such Maitri necessary? What else can give to all living beings the same happiness which one seeks for one’s own self, to keep the mind impartial, open to all, with affection for everyone and hatred for none’ (Ambedkar, 2006:129). Thus, love compassion towards living forms is an essential feature of Buddhism and it is one of the important ecological virtues that it had given to the world. Here Ambedkar proposes self-emphatic and reflexive ethical code for human beings while engaging with other species. It means he not only satisfied with anthropocentric conception of the world rather prefers an inclusive bio-ecological centric world wherein all species have equal rights for their existence.

For Ambedkar the essence of true India lies in Buddhist tradition. For him Brahmanism is an anti-thesis to humanistic values and nature’s biological ethics. He upholds the views of Buddha on conservation of animals and all life forms from destruction. While invoking the ideas of Buddha, Ambedkar condemned the killing animals in the following passage ‘that sacrifice neither were nay oxen slain, neither goats, nor fowls, nor fatted pigs, nor were any kinds of living creatures put to death. No trees were cut down to be used as posts, no Dabbha grasses mown to strew around the sacrificial spot’ (Ambedkar, 2006: 267). This bitter critique on nature’s exploitation was launched by Buddha against Brahmanism more than two thousand years back and it was called back by Ambedkar with his Neo-Buddhism.

Third important feature of Neo-Buddhism is its powerful eco-sensitivity and eco-gospel based upon ethical treatment of all living forms. In the perception of Buddha a king, a rich man and popular persons are not great men. A great man according to him is ‘a man given to the welfare of many of many folks, to the happiness of many folk’ (Ambedkar, 2006: 293). Thus the essence of man in Buddhist thought is one who lives for others.

This ethical dogma reflected in the discourse of Buddhist ecology. While countering the Brahminical notion of out castes Buddha defined who is out castes in the following words: ‘whosoever in this world harms living beings once-born or twice-born, in whom there is no compassion for living beings is an outcast’ (Ambedkar, 2006: 307). Ambedkar invoked Buddha to counter Brahmanical notion caste system and outcast for him should not be determined by birth rather by qualities of person. Thus, Ambedkar marshalled the ideas of Buddha and evolve a powerful critique on not only iniquitous social order but also eco-sensitive ideas which capable of bringing eco-sensitivity in society.

CONCLUSION

Ecology has emerged as an important phenomenon in the academic and public discourse. It is indeed necessary to expand its scope by invoking new ideas to find solutions to emerging ecological crisis. The ideas of Ambedkar offer a fresh dimension to Indian environmentalism. His ideas show that environment needs to be located in the dynamics of social forces that determines the nature of human relationship with environment. The ideas of Ambedkar strongly remind us that environmental governance should be crafted based upon the principle of equity and bio-ethical spirits to cater to the needs of all sections of human society. In a way the Ambedkar ideas enables us to focus on ecological democracy and inclusive environmentalism, which means environment for all. Particularly his engagement with Buddhism preaches bio-centric approach to look at social process. This means all species including human beings have equal rights over the fight of nature and at the same time all human beings has responsibility to participate in conservation of environment. In nutshell, the eco-philosophy of Ambedkar can be termed as ‘environment for all and all for environment’. This paper argues the concept of egalitarian environmentalism of Ambedkar has global and local relevance. However, his contribution to ecology needs to be further seriously investigated to cement his place as an ecological thinker.

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