



Religion, Caste, and Social Justice: A Critical Study of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Philosophy of Religion

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19541880>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 26-03-2026

Published: 10-04-2026

Keywords:

*B. R. Ambedkar, Religion,
Buddhism, Dhamma, Caste,
Social Justice.*

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the philosophy of religion, articulated by Dr. Ambedkar, emphasizing on his critical analysis of religion, caste, and social justice in India. He conceptualizes religion not as static but dynamic social institution that must be evaluated by the principles rationality, morality, and social utility. Ambedkar strongly criticizes Hinduism for legitimising caste-based graded inequalities and argues that any religion which is failed to promote liberty, equality, and fraternity is obviously unjust. His reinterpretation of religion emphasises its ethical perspectives rather any kind of ritualistic practices or religious dogmas. He distinguishes between religion and Dhamma, where he argues Dhamma as the moral and social order grounded in justice, compassion and sense of belongingness. This paper highlights that Ambedkar's engagement with Buddhism, culminating in his historic conversion in 1956 which indicates the rejection of oppressive structures and the construction of modern, rational, and egalitarian religious identity. He describes Buddhism as a rational and ethical system that is the broader idea of social reconstruction. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar observed religion as a powerful social institution which can shape moral order and human relationships. His seminal works such as *Who were Shudras?*, *Philosophy of Hinduism*, and the *Buddha and His Dhamma*, this paper explores how Dr. B. R. Ambedkar viewed Buddhism as modern religion



aligned with liberal democracy, scientific temper, and Dalit identity. By emphasizing on Dhamma over traditional religion, he provided a blueprint for de-Brahminising Indian Society and uplifting the marginalized communities. For him, Buddhism becomes a transformative path of non-violence, ethical self-conquest, and social equality. Ultimately, B. R. Ambedkar's philosophy redefines religion as a progressive force or social force that fosters dignity, equality, and social transformation, providing a powerful framework for addressing ongoing challenges of inequality and injustice in today's society. His ideas remain significant source of inspiration for struggles for social inclusiveness and human dignity in pluralistic democracies

Introduction

India is a various diversity nation in nature. It also presents the hierarchical structure of Indian caste system. Hinduism is one of the oldest religions in India which divide caste system into four categories – Brahmin, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Apart from that outcastes are also identified by society for being suppression – that is the untouchable Dalits. Babasaheb Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was an erudite personality, a symbol of knowledge and a great son of India. He was a public intellectual, social revolutionary and a prolific communicator. He has left behind thought provoking writings and speeches bearing interdisciplinary perspectives, with insightful analysis of socio-political situations which evoke intellectual reasons and emotions. His writings are having profound sense of justice manifested in emancipation of marginalized masses. He not only dedicated his life for ameliorating the conditions of deprived sections of the society, but his views on inclusiveness and “*Samajik Samrasta*” continue inspiring national endeavour.

The struggles of the ordinary people forced the centers of power and knowledge to consider the importance of Ambedkar and his ideas in social reconstruction of the nation. With Ambedkar as the source of inspiration, Dalits are struggling to write their own history by interrogating the dominant Brahminical traditions. The project of De- Brahminisation of Indian history has appeal among the Dalit scholars in writing Indian history, culture and philosophy. He brings the religion as a focal point in reference to caste system. He observes religion as social and personal matter of facts which leads to the pragmatic approach. He emphasizes on rationality which is the guiding principle in evaluating the principles and practices of religion. So the pragmatic method of Ambedkar came out of his social



responsibility and in presenting the history from the victim's point of view. In essence he made a serious attempt in constructing the Indian history in which one finds dignified place for 'sudras' and 'untouchable communities'.

He made a systematic attempt to construct the histories and genealogies of the submerged social groups of Indian society by questioning the elite and dominant established Brahminical positions. He seems confident of his position by declaring it as '*fresh insights and new visions*' in looking at Indian history and philosophy. In the year 1946, Ambedkar identified five streams of thoughts among the Hindus of Indian society in his writing on '*who are Shudras*'- Orthodox, *Aryasamajists*, respecters of law (Hindu social system is all wrong, but who holds that there is no necessity to attack it. Since law does not recognize it, it is dying, if not dead system) political minded (Swaraj is important than social reform) and *Rationalists* (regard social reform as primary and even more important than Swaraj). In the words of Ambedkar; "*I claim that in my research I have been guided by the best tradition of the historian who treats all literature as vulgar- I am using the word in its original sense of belonging to the people –to be examined and tested by accepted rules of evidence without recognizing any distinction between the sacred and profane and with the sole object of finding the truth*" (Who were shudras, 1990).

The Conversion Event of 1956 spearheaded by Babasaheb Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the turn of events and debates that preceded it as well as the various ways in which scholars have looked at the Neo-Buddhist movement in India, can be seen as constituting a 'critical event' not only in the biography of the Indian Nation but also in the biographies of those who identify themselves as Buddhists in India today. The present study is an exploration of the ideas of Dr. Ambedkar on religion in general and Buddhism in particular, setting them in the backdrop of key debates in Sociology and Anthropology regarding the nature and meaning of religion as a category as well implications of association between religion and power. Further, an attempt is made to probe the implications of the intervention of Dr. Ambedkar as consisting in and giving rise to primarily a dual emphasis, namely the larger project of constructing a 'modern' religion consonant with the political philosophy and praxis of liberal democracy and a religion of (communitarian) identity for dalits.

Ambedkar's Conception of Philosophy of Religion

"A few words may be useful at the outset as an indication of what we commonly mean by the Philosophy of Religion. Philosophy was described long ago by Plato as the synoptic view of things. That is to say, it is the attempt to see things together – to keep all the main features of the world in view, and to grasp them in their relation to one another as parts of one whole. Only thus can we acquire a sense of



proportion and estimate aright the significance of any particular range of facts for our ultimate conclusions about the nature of the world-process and the world-ground. Accordingly, the philosophy of any particular department of experience, the Philosophy of Religion, the Philosophy of Art, The Philosophy of Law, is to be taken as meaning an analysis and interpretation of the experience In question in its bearing upon our view of man and the world in which he lives. And when the facts upon which we concentrate are so universal, and in their nature so remarkable, as those disclosed by the history of religion—the philosophy of man’s religious experience—cannot but exercise a determining influence upon our general philosophical conclusions. In fact with many writers the particular discussion tends to merge in the more general.”(Ambedkar, 1957)

Ambedkar viewed religion as a powerful social institution capable of shaping human relationships and the moral order of society. He strongly criticized Hinduism for its role in upholding the caste system and justifying the marginalization of Dalits. He believed that certain religions could become instruments of oppression. For Ambedkar, the true test of a religion was its ability to promote social justice and equality. Ambedkar’s philosophy of religion emphasizes moral principles, social utility, and rationality, asserting that any religion must be compatible with scientific understanding and promote the dignity of all individuals. He believed that a religion’s primary function should be to offer prosperity and elevation in the present world for all people, not just provide salvation in the next. In Ambedkar’s view, all religions, whether extant or extinct, civilized or uncivilized, are imbued with historical and psychological dimensions. Consequently, the philosophy of religion must encompass both normative and descriptive inquiries. Ambedkar contended that each religion possesses its unique philosophy, thereby rejecting any notion of a universal philosophy applicable to all.

However, Ambedkar does not use the term “theology” in either of the senses outlined above. Rather, he uses it to signify ‘natural theology’, which revolves around the theory of nature, with God and divine governance at its core. Traditionally, according to Ambedkar, natural theology embodies three fundamental tenets as elucidated by various thinkers. Firstly, it posits that God is the creator of the world, known as nature or the universe. Secondly, it asserts that all events within the world are directly governed by God, thus constituting nature. Thirdly, it postulates that God, being sovereign, administers His governance over humanity through his moral law. Sumant Yashwant in his ‘Situating Religion in Ambedkar’s Political Discourse’, tries to establish these three facets for natural theology as following; (1) the existence of God, (2) God’s providential governance of the universe, and (3) God’s moral governance of humanity—Ambedkar propounded the concept of religion with the aim of constructing an ideal framework for divine governance. The main goal is to foster a societal order wherein individuals lead



morally decent lives. It is within this framework that Ambedkar employs and contextualizes the term 'religion.

Ambedkar has mentioned four characteristics of religion: Religion in the sense of morality must, therefore, remain the governing principle in every society; Religion it is to function must be in accord with region which merely another name for sciences; its moral code must recognize the fundamental tenets of liberty, equality and fraternity; unless a religion recognizes these three fundamental principles of social life, religion will be doomed; and religion must not sanctify or ennoble poverty” (Ambedkar, B. R. 1943). W N Kuber in his book “Dr Ambedkar: A critical Study” mentions that religion, as Ambedkar conceived, was a rational one, a moral one and a spiritual one. It was secular and not extramundane. Ambedkar regarded Dhamma as religion. He (Ambedkar) observed, “Religion is personal, contrary to this, Dhamma is social.” His view of religion was social and secular and morality was the key-note of it. In Dhamma there is no place for prayers, pilgrimages, rituals, ceremonies or sacrifices. Morality is the essence of Dhamma; without it there is no Dhamma (Ambedkar, B R, 1957, 216).

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar provided a pragmatic critique of religious approach, highlighting the intersection of religion and power dynamics. Dr. Ambedkar observes “Religion is the source of power is illustrated by the history of India where the priest holds a sway over the common man often greater than the magistrate and where everything, even such things as strikes and elections, so easily take a religious turn and can so easily be given a religious twist.” Ambedkar’s observation that “Religion is the source of power” illustrates how religious identity can intersect with political authority, influencing societal structures. His critique of Hinduism and the caste system reveals his concern about the use of religion to justify social inequalities. Ambedkar’s critical stance on Hinduism was perceived as a challenge to Indian nationalism, leading to tensions with contemporaries, including Gandhi. Ambedkar’s approach to religion was complex. Sampathkumar says, “B.R. Ambedkar claimed himself to be an atheist and found no need of religion. But he was ready to use it as a mode of political action to attain political gains”(M.Sampathkumar ,2024). It reflects the Ambedkar’s matter of understanding of religion which is a discourse to challenge social injustices.

What is Religion According to Ambedkar?

“I am using the word Religion to mean Theology. This will

Perhaps be insufficient for the purposes of definition”. (Ambedkar, 1957)



Religion is a term with no fixed definition, as its meaning has changed over time. In the earliest stage, when primitive man could not explain natural phenomena like rain, floods, or lightning, he resorted to magic. Thus, religion was then identified with magical practices. In the second stage, religion came to mean beliefs, rituals, ceremonies, prayers, and sacrifices. The central idea, however, was the existence of a mysterious power behind these natural forces. This power was at first feared as malevolent but was later seen as benevolent, requiring propitiation through offerings and worship. Over time, this power came to be recognized as God, the Creator of the world and of man. With this emerged beliefs in the soul, moral accountability, and the need to cure or purify the soul. Hence, religion today connotes belief in God, the soul, worship, moral conduct, prayers, ceremonies, and sacrifices.

Religion and Morality

Religion and morality are often linked, but their relationship is not foundational. Religion is primarily centered on God, soul, worship, rituals, and ceremonies. Morality enters only in human relations, often as a means to maintain peace and order, not as its core. Religious morality argues, “Be good to your neighbour because you are both children of God,” but this makes morality dependent on divine authority rather than rational duty. Thus, morality is like a wagon attached to religion, casual and occasional, applied only when necessary. Therefore, in religion, morality lacks permanence and effectiveness as an independent principle. He says “The action of morality in the functioning of religion is therefore casual and occasional.”(Ambedkar, 1957) John Hick, a prominent philosopher also distinct between religion and morality. John Hick linked religion and morality through his soul-making theodicy, which argues that suffering and evil are necessary for spiritual and moral growth in a world with an “epistemic distance” between God and humanity. He proposed a pluralistic view of religion, where different faiths are different responses to a single, ultimate reality, and that moral and

spiritual development occurs through interaction with this reality and its challenges. Ambedkar observes that morality is the optional for the religion, it may vary in different actions or conditions.

Critique of Hinduism

Ambedkar in his ‘Philosophy of Hinduism’ criticizes Hinduism as temporary and caste based religion, which he saw as a primary cause of social injustice and conflict due to its deep entrenchment of the caste system and Brahmanical traditions. Ambedkar challenged the conflation of religion and nationalism within the anti-colonial struggle, which he believed obscured the profound inequalities and suffering caused by caste. He criticized Manusmriti. The Manusmriti presents the Brahmin as the highest of all



created beings, giving divine justification for his supremacy in society. According to Manu, the Brahmin was produced from the mouth of God himself, symbolizing his role as the conveyor of offerings to both gods and ancestors, thereby maintaining the cosmic order. Manu states that the very birth of a Brahmin is an incarnation of the sacred law (Veda), and he is regarded as one with Brahman, the supreme reality. This divine origin establishes him as the “lord of all created beings” entrusted with the protection of sacred knowledge and moral order. However, Manu emphasizes that the Brahmin’s existence is inherently superior. He declares that whatever exists in the world is the Brahmin’s property, and others live only through the benevolence of Brahmins. This idea reinforces a hierarchical society where Brahmins occupy the topmost position, not only spiritually but also materially. Kings themselves, though rulers of kingdoms, are directed to worship and consult Brahmins, especially those learned in the Vedas and ethics, for guidance. Manu even warns that kings should never offend Brahmins or seize their property, for their spiritual power, through sacrifices and curses, could destroy armies and kingdoms. He points, “the philosophy of Hinduism therefore neither satisfies the test of social utility nor does it satisfy the test of individual justice.”(Ambedkar, 1957)

The Role of Religion in Society

The nature of religion in ancient societies, where religious life was not deeply concerned with inner faith, morality, or rational understanding, but rather with outward conformity to rituals and traditions. Religion was viewed primarily as a public and communal duty, closely tied to political life. The stability of society was believed to depend on strict adherence to prescribed ceremonies and observances. Any neglect of these practices was thought to bring disorder to the community and to incur the displeasure of the gods. What mattered most was not whether a person truly believed in the gods or whether religion influenced their heart and reason, but whether they performed the rituals correctly. Piety was measured by external action rather than internal conviction. This reflects a formal and Institutional understanding of religion, where it was integrated into the political system and functioned as a tool to maintain social cohesion, order, and divine favour. Just as citizens had duties to the state, they also had duties to the gods, expressed through ritual compliance. In this way, religion became an outward framework of rules and customs, rather than a personal or spiritual experience rooted in morality or inner transformation. So that, Ambedkar believed that any religion that aims to serve society must have a moral code that aligns with science and recognizes the fundamental tenets of liberty, equality, and fraternity. He advocated for a revolutionary reconstruction of society grounded in religious transformation, believing that political and legal changes alone were insufficient to address the deep-rooted problems of social inequality.



Dhamma Vs Religion

In distinguishing between “Dhamma” and “religion” Ambedkar argues that for traditional religion, morality was secondary, and derivative, to Buddhists, Dhamma was morality, though it was a sacred morality, necessary to bind society together. This basic insight provided a framework for the book, Ambedkar’s manual of Buddhism which included a collection of stories of the Buddha, his disciples and his teachings drawn from the major Pali scripts. And According to Dr. Ambedkar, “There is a great difference between Buddhism and Hinduism Buddhism means casteless society based on equal rights. Hinduism on the other hand is primarily based on caste system, a system which encourages aloofness, inequality and exploitation.” He also made another difference that, “Unlike Hinduism, Buddhism lays on emphasis on the attainment of heaven. Nor it is necessary. To be happy in the present life, one should practice the ethics of morality, non-violence (ahimsa), equality and universal brotherhood. This is an eternal truth taught by the Buddha In his own words, “Dhamma consists of Prajna and Karuna. Prajna understands. The Buddha made Prajna one of the two corner-stone of His Dhamma because he did not wish to leave any room for superstition. Karuna is love. Because, without it society can neither live nor grow, that is why the Buddha made it the second corner-stone of His Dhamma. Dr. Ambedkar seeks Dhamma as a social order. He differentiated Religion and Dhamma by the following lines.

Religion, it is said, is personal and one must keep it to oneself. One must not let it play its part in public life. Contrary to this, Dhamma is social. It is fundamentally and essentially so. “Dhamma is righteousness, which means right relations between man and man in all spheres of life. One man if he is alone does not need Dhamma. But when there are two men living in relation to each other they must find a place for Dhamma whether they like it or not. Neither can escape it. In other words, Society cannot do without Dhamma.” (Ambedkar, 1957)

Dr. Ambedkar sees a concern for human welfare (defined generally with reference to non-violence and social equality) as a central teaching of Buddhism and associates such welfare with rationality. For instance, Ambedkar explains his principles for distinguishing between Buddhist Dhamma and dangerous Brahmnical views, “Anything therefore which is rational and logical, other things being equal, may be taken to be the word of the Buddha. The Buddha never cared to enter into a discussion which was not profitable for man’s welfare cannot be accepted to be the word of the Buddha”(Anne M. Blackburn,1993). Ambedkar reinterprets Buddhism as a religion of reason and social ethics. For him, Buddhism is not about abstract rituals or supernatural claims, but about rational action that promotes equality, non-violence, and human welfare. Anything outside this—especially caste-based, irrational



Brahmanical ideas—should be rejected. If a teaching is rational and promotes human welfare, we can accept it as consistent with Buddhism. If a discussion or idea does not serve practical welfare, the Buddha himself would not have considered it important.

Buddhism as a Transformative Path

Ethics in Buddhism is guided by compassion, non-violence, and truthfulness. To cause no harm, cherish no ill-will, and overcome anger with love are seen as the highest virtues. The emphasis on conquering the self—through control of desire, anger, and greed—reflects an ethical focus on inner transformation rather than external obedience. Morality is not rigid but practical: it aims at human welfare, freedom from suffering, and peace in society. The ethical point of view here is deeply humanistic—virtue, mindfulness, and kindness elevate both the individual and the community. Thus, Buddhist ethics replace divine command with self-cultivated virtue, where goodness is its own reward, and wrongdoing its own punishment. He acknowledged Buddhism as a way of life and says;

“ On good, evil and sin. On craving and lust. On hurt and ill-will. On anger and enmity. On man, mind and impurities. On self and self-conquest. On wisdom, justice and good company. On thoughtfulness and mindfulness. On vigilance, earnestness and boldness. On sorrow and happiness; On Charity and Kindness. On hypocrisy. On following the Right Way. Mix not true Dhamma with false Dhamma”(Ambedkar, 1956).

The Buddha and His Dhamma presents morality as the foundation of a meaningful life. The Buddhist way of life emphasizes doing good, avoiding evil, and cultivating self-restraint. Ethically, good actions are not defined by ritual but by their consequences: deeds that bring no regret, foster happiness, and contribute to harmony are truly moral. Evil, on the other hand, is not punished by divine decree but ripens naturally in suffering for the doer. This view shifts morality from fear of external authority to responsibility for one's own actions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's views on religion, emphasizing its role as a social and moral force rather than an eternal or fixed entity. Ambedkar, a key figure in India's social reform and the architect of its Constitution, critiqued traditional religions. For perpetuating the caste system and marginalizing Dalits. He argued that religion should evolve with culture, beliefs, and values, promoting equality, justice, and rationality over rigid doctrines. His 1956 conversion to Buddhism marked a significant event, redefining religion as a tool for social justice and Dalit identity. Ambedkar thinks that religion as a



dynamic institution capable of shaping human relationships and moral order. He rejected Hinduism's caste-based structure, which he saw as oppressive, and proposed that a religion's validity lies in its ability to foster social utility, scientific compatibility, and individual dignity. Unlike traditional theology, which often centers on divine governance, Ambedkar's concept of "natural theology" focused on moral law and societal well-being, rejecting supernatural claims. He outlined that religion must govern society morally, align with science, uphold liberty, equality, and fraternity, and avoid sanctifying poverty. A central distinction in Ambedkar's philosophy is between "religion" and "Dhamma." He critiqued traditional religion as personal and secondary to morality, often entwined with rituals and prayers, while Dhamma, rooted in Buddhism, is a social, secular moral framework. Dhamma emphasizes righteousness, non-violence (ahimsa), and universal brotherhood, with Prajna (wisdom) and Karuna (love) as its cornerstones. Unlike Hinduism, which he associated with caste and inequality, Dhamma seeks to bind society through rational ethics and human welfare, rejecting superstition and exploitation. Ambedkar's pragmatic approach stemmed from his commitment to the marginalized, challenging Brahminical dominance in Indian history and philosophy. His writings, such as "Who Were the Shudras?" and his reinterpretation of Buddhism, reflect a rational inquiry into religion's role in power dynamics. He observed that religion often amplifies political authority, as seen in India where priests wield significant influence. Overall, Ambedkar's philosophy reimagines religion as a progressive force for equality and moral order, leaving a lasting legacy in India's social reconstruction. He emphasized "religion that does not recognize the fundamental rights of man is no religion at all." Thus, any religion that justified untouchability or caste was not merely flawed but morally illegitimate.

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