

From Tradition to Reform: Ambedkar's Reconstruction of Buddhist Thought

Rumpa Chakraborty

Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Ghatal Rabindra Satbarsiki Mahavidyalaya Ghata,
Paschim Medinipur. Pin: 721212

Abstract: This paper critically examines the reinterpretation of Buddhism by B. R. Ambedkar and the socio-philosophical motivations underlying his conversion. Unlike conventional religious conversions motivated primarily by spiritual concerns, Ambedkar's embrace of Buddhism was a deliberate ethical and political act of resistance against the caste system entrenched within Hinduism. Rejecting Hinduism for its sanction of hierarchical inequality, he sought a religious framework grounded in justice, rationality, and human dignity. Among various alternatives, Buddhism appealed to him because of its egalitarian ethos, ethical orientation, and compatibility with democratic ideals.

However, Ambedkar did not accept traditional Buddhism uncritically. In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, he questioned metaphysical doctrines such as karma, rebirth, and nirvana, offering instead socially engaged and rational interpretations. His reformulated tradition, known as Navayāna or the "New Way," placed morality, social justice, and the empowerment of the marginalized at the center of Buddhist practice. He redefined dukkha (suffering) not as an individual existential condition, but as a manifestation of structural social and economic injustice. Similarly, Dhamma was interpreted not as ritual observance, but as an ethical path rooted in compassion, equality, and justice.

The paper also analyzes the varied responses to Ambedkar's reinterpretation. While traditionalist Buddhists regard Navayāna as a departure from canonical orthodoxy, many modern scholars and social activists view it as a necessary and contextually relevant reform. Ultimately, this study argues that Navayana represents a legitimate and philosophically grounded development within Buddhist thought, transforming Buddhism into a dynamic instrument for combating caste oppression, inequality, and injustice in modern India.

Keywords: B. R. Ambedkar; Navayana Buddhism; Social Justice; Caste System; Dhamma; Buddhist Reinterpretation; Equality; Rational Religion.

Introduction:

The Indian Renaissance gave birth to many great thinkers and ideas, and among them, Dr. Ambedkar holds a very high position. Unfortunately, due to his limited role in the freedom movement, he is often underappreciated. However, as the new India began to take shape, his thoughts gained increasing importance, and gradually his core ideas gained recognition (Spini, 2023). We are all familiar with his role in the making of the Indian Constitution and the Hindu Code Bill. However, his final philosophical book "*Buddha and His Dhamm*" is less widely read and known compared to his other works. This article attempts to reflect on some important questions related to this. The first question is: Why did Ambedkar, born into a Hindu family, finally decide to renounce Hinduism? The second question: Among Buddhism emphasizes morality and social responsibility. Its ethics are not based on fear of heaven or hell but on human values. Buddhism teaches equality, friendship, compassion, renunciation, and service. Therefore, we can say that due to the rational, ethical, and egalitarian nature

of Buddhism, He reinterpreted it according to modern sensibilities, yet, even today, many of his interpretations are debated and not universally accepted. This suggests that traditional Buddhist texts also need reinterpretation (Gokhale, 2020). In his book *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar presented a new interpretation of Buddhism. Ambedkar called his reinterpretation *Navayāna* (the “New Way”). Under this framework, he critically examined many aspects of traditional Buddhism and presented his own rational views. For example, he rejected the idea that people are born poor, diseased, or suffering because of their karma in a previous life. Influenced by his studies of Buddhism and other religions, he asserted that these teachings were later additions and not part of the original doctrine (Kumar, 2019).

Drawing on the example of the Rohini River dispute, Gautama Buddha is portrayed as a practical moral teacher who resolved conflicts through ethical reasoning rather than escapism. B. R. Ambedkar adopted this interpretation to argue that Buddhism offers rational and social solutions to injustice. While accepting the Four Noble Truths, he rejected their metaphysical explanations and redefined suffering (*dukkha*) as rooted in social, economic, and structural inequality rather than spiritual desire. In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar presented Buddhism as a moral and social philosophy, rejecting supernatural elements such as rebirth, karma as past-life destiny, heaven, and hell. He reinterpreted karma and rebirth in ethical and symbolic terms, grounding morality not in divine authority but in human welfare.

Ambedkar equated Dhamma with morality, placing ethical conduct at the center of religion instead of God or soul. He emphasized that moral action should promote social justice, equality, and human dignity. Redefining the Noble Eightfold Path as a method to remove injustice, he transformed Buddhism into an active program for social emancipation. He also reconceived the role of monks as socially engaged reformers committed to justice and public welfare. In works such as *Buddha or Karl Marx*, he compared Buddhist ethics with Marxist thought, arguing that while both addressed suffering, Buddhism offered a non-violent, morally grounded path to social transformation. Overall, Ambedkar reshaped Buddhism into a rational, humanitarian philosophy aimed at building a just and egalitarian society.

Reactions to B. R. Ambedkar’s reinterpretation of Buddhism are broadly divided into two groups: traditionalists, who argue that his rejection of karma and rebirth departs from core Buddhist doctrine, and modernists, who support his rational, humanistic adaptation aligned with science and human rights. Ambedkar emphasized that ethical teachings are more central than metaphysical or ritual elements, presenting Buddhism as a moral and social philosophy aimed at justice, equality, and compassion. While some critics claim he reshaped Buddhism to suit political goals, others see his *Navayana* as a legitimate continuation of Buddhist evolution, comparable to earlier traditions such as *Mahayana* and *Vajrayana*.

Ambedkar minimized metaphysical doctrines and redefined Dhamma as a universal moral system grounded in social ethics rather than divine authority. Though he critically engaged with Marxist thought—especially in *Buddha or Karl Marx*—he argued that Marxism focused too narrowly on material conditions and lacked a moral foundation. In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, he proposed a humanitarian and rational Buddhism committed to liberty, equality, and fraternity—principles also emphasized in *Annihilation of Caste*. Ambedkar distinguished between Dhamma and the state, asserting that while moral principles may guide governance, they should not be imposed as law. Ultimately, his reinterpretation seeks to remove caste oppression and establish a universal, ethical religion oriented toward social transformation, making *Navayana* a refined and humanistic reform within the broader Buddhist tradition rather than a complete break from it.

1. Within Buddhism itself, there are many schools of thought and diversity: Hence, it is not difficult to say that Ambedkar’s interpretation presents a new perspective, but it can still be recognized—using Wittgenstein’s idea of “family resemblance”—as a legitimate part of the Buddhist family.

2. From a scientific point of view, Ambedkar's reinterpretation-like Early Buddhism-emphasizes rationality and realism. It presents a necessary ethical lens for understanding and resolving the issue of human suffering (dukkha).
3. The doctrines of karma and rebirth may be part of traditional Buddhism and found in many schools of thought, but they do not occupy a central place in all of them. The idea that suffering in this life is due to past bad karma or that good karma can yield a better rebirth is mentioned in texts like the Satipatthana Sutta, but Ambedkar does not emphasize this.
4. If we are to choose between the doctrine of anātmā (non-self) and the karma- rebirth theory as the core principle of Buddhism, then the people must choose the former. Along with this, the karma-rebirth. theory's logical inconsistencies must be exposed. In my view, without the concept of a permanent soul, the karma-rebirth idea cannot be logically sustained-and in this regard, Ambedkar is right.
5. The uniqueness of Buddhism lies not only in its doctrines but also in its methodology. It is not a religion of mysticism or mere belief, but a rational approach that encourages critical thinking. Even the Buddha himself encouraged questioning and verification based on experience. From this standpoint, Ambedkar's interpretation aligns with the spirit of Buddhist rationality and inquiry.

Conclusion

In the end, we must not ignore the fact that traditional Buddhism has many internal inconsistencies. Various philosophical schools emerged in later times, including Sautrāntika, Vaibhāsika, Yogācāra, and Mādhyamika, each with their own interpretations. Ambedkar's Navayāna Buddhism can be placed in this lineage, even though it opposes the karma-rebirth theory, because it still embodies the core moral and rational spirit of the Dhamma. Therefore, it can be said that despite rejecting certain traditional doctrines, Ambedkar's Navayana Buddhism represents a new synthesis and interpretation within the Buddhist tradition. When we look at influential Buddhist interpretations today, Ambedkar's Navayāna stands out more prominently than traditional schools like Hinayāna or Mahayāna. That's because it is based on modern values such as rationality, scientific thinking, liberty, equality, fraternity, and compassion. Hence, it must be emphasized that his version of Dhamma can be equally placed among other contemporary ethical and philosophical systems like existentialism, humanism, and postmodernism. One important point is that, due to his declining health, Ambedkar hurriedly completed *The Buddha and His Dhamma* in the final months of his life. This should be acknowledged while evaluating the book. Nevertheless, Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism is a serious philosophical contribution and deserves to be compared with other great systems of thought. Buddhist philosophy scholars should further explore and expand it-for it reflects Ambedkar's ultimate vision of human liberation and truth.

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