



Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Interpretation of the Doctrines of *Karma* and Rebirth

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Date of Call for Article:

27 May, 2024

Article Received Date:

18 June, 2024

Date of sending for peer review:

6 August, 2024

Date of receiving from peer review:

1 September, 2024

Date of Revision:

9 September, 2024

Date of Acceptance:

11 November, 2024

Date of Publication:

26 January, 2025

Abstract

Background: This paper analyzes Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's interpretation on the doctrine of *karma* and rebirth in Buddhism. Dr. Ambedkar, obviously, accepts the traditional Buddhist concept regarding *karma* and rebirth but he forwards his different opinion that the body upon the dissolution gets its *Mahabhuts* (*Prithvi, Agni, jal, Vayu*) stored in the respective *Mahabhuts* in the Universe.

Objective: The paper is meant for clarifying Ambedkar's idea on *karma* and rebirth. It is to prove that the aggregates of a being get mixed into the mega aggregates in the universe during the time of death; and at the time of rebirth, the aggregates get reassembled with *karmic* consciousness, and there the being gets rebirth based on the past *karma*.

Methodology: Library based Interpretive or Analytical approach is adopted to carry out the research.

Result: Through the study it has been found that at the time of rebirth, the *Mahabhuts* including the elements like heat and consciousness come back to the mother's womb to get assembled and there the new being gets delivered on the planet together with the fruits of its old *karma*. Ambedkar relates *karma* and rebirth to modern science explaining 'Rebirth' as a cycle of physical elements, instead of the wandering soul. It is shown how Ambedkar re-interprets the traditional Buddhist ideas to fit with the conceptions of modern science and philosophy in the article.

Conclusion: The Paper forwards the idea of Ambedkar that there is no rebirth of the soul but regeneration of the matter or element. There is the possibility of the fruit or retribution of the moral or immoral actions done by a person as the new being gets its old elements assembled during the time of rebirth.

Keywords: *Karma*, Rebirth, *Anattavāda*, *Mahābhūtas*, *Lokāyatika*

Paper Type: Research Paper

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Introduction

Generally, it is understood that Dr. B.R. Ambedkar contributed a lot for the revival of Buddhism in India by embracing Buddhism himself in 1956 and also by initiating millions of his followers into Buddhist order. The significance of Buddhism which seems to have attracted Ambedkar are reflected in his famous book '*The Buddha and His Dhamma.*' Ambedkar has presented his new analysis of Buddhism by interpreting the concepts in his own way. The interpretation of concepts of Buddhism has been criticized by many scholars. The interpretation of the Buddhism by Ambedkar has brought Buddhism more relevant for the modern world. The writing and speeches of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar have been published by the Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Mumbai in sixteen volumes out of which volume XI is *The Buddha and His Dhamma* and Volume XVI consists three works related with Pali language and grammar. They are namely (i) *The Pali Grammar*, (ii) *The Pali Dictionary* and (iii) *Bouddha Pooja Pāṭha*.

In the Introduction of *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Dr. B R Ambedkar has raised some of the problems for discussion and to make people inquisitive about the problems. Among many metaphysical issues, he interpreted the third problem related to the doctrines of soul, karma and rebirth:

The Buddha denied the existence of the soul. But he is also said to have affirmed the doctrine of karma and rebirth. At once a question arises. If there is no soul, how can there be karma? If there is no soul, how can there be rebirth? These are baffling questions. In what sense did the Buddha use the words karma and rebirth? Did he use them in a different sense than the sense in which they were used by the Brahmins of his day? If so, in what sense? Did he use them in the same sense in which the Brahmins used them? If so, is there not a terrible contradiction between the denial of the soul and the affirmation of karma and rebirth? This contradiction needs to be resolved. (Introduction, Ambedkar 1977)

Concept of 'Karma and Rebirth' in Buddhism

During the Buddha's times, a set of ideological questions was very common. The most important and fundamental among them was: the Sassatavāda (Eternalism) and Ucchedavāda (Annihilationism). One of the earliest Indian materialists was Ajita Kesakambali, a contemporary to the Buddha. The *Sāmaññaphalasutta* of Dīghanikāya also records the view thus:

There is no such thing, O king, as alms or sacrifice or offering. There is neither fruit nor result of good or evil deeds. . . . A human being is built up of the four elements. When he dies the earthly in him returns and relapses to the earth, the fluid to the water, the heat to the fire, the wind to the air, and his faculties pass into space. The four bearers, on the bier as a fifth, take his dead body away; till they reach the burning-ground men utter forth eulogies, but there his bones are bleached, and his offerings end in ashes. It is a doctrine of fools; this talk of gifts. It is an empty lie, mere idle talk, when men say there is profit therein. Fools and wise alike, on the dissolution of the body, are cut off, annihilated, and after death they are not¹. (Davids 1899, 73-74)

The Upanishadic seers and many others believed in the former, while the Lokāyatika-s (Ancient Materialists) and others believed in Annihilationism. The Buddha had the option to go with any one of them and decided to reject both. He knew that joining the former would mean the path where there was no scope for emancipation, while in case of the latter there would be total annihilation or destruction. The Buddha knew fully well that in both cases no organization could be built up and no-body could be led to emancipation. He, therefore, sought the middle course where he taught Anicca and Anatta and thereby rejected eternalism and annihilationism. At the same time, significantly enough, another path

1 natthi, mahārāja, dinnam, natthi yittham, natthi hutam, natthi sukata dukkaṭānaṃ kammānaṃ phalaṃ vipāko, natthi ayam loko, natthi paro loko, natthi mātā, natthi pitā, natthi sattā opapātikā, natthi loke samaṇabrāhmaṇā sammagatā sammāpaṭipanna, ye imaṅca lokam paraṅca lokam sayam abhiññā sacchikatvā pavedenti. cātumahābhū-

leading to Anattavāda (the doctrine of soullessness) open to the thinkers in those days was to arrive at Anattavāda through the belief in the supremacy of the four bhūta-s, popularly called as mahābhūta-s. These are *paṭhavī*, (earth), *āpo* (water), *vāyo* (air) and *tejo* (fire). The Lokāyatika-s unhesitatingly tread this path and declared their unequivocal faith in annihilation after death, The Buddha was not prepared to accept this position. He, therefore, rejected it as he did the former one i. e. the Sāsattavāda.

Similarly, the Buddhist doctrine of karma holds that a person who dies here and is reborn elsewhere is neither the same person, nor another. The new being is neither absolutely the same since it has changed, nor totally different being the same stream of karmic energy. There is merely a continuity of a particular life-flux or a continuity of the same series. Individual life is comprehended by knowledge as a continuous course (*santati*) in which are linked the notions of individual forms (*nāma-rūpa*), one disappearing, another appearing; one subsiding another arising uninterruptedly (*apubbam acarimam*).

The process of going of *nāma-rūpa* from one state of existence to another has been explained in Pali texts. Both *nāma-rūpa* are in perpetual flux. On the dissolution of the body, the physical gross form remains here and is disintegrated in the temporal process. The subtle form of the *rūpa*, more correctly the 'seed-residuum' submerged with the conscious continuum flow with the proceeding stream of physio-psychic amalgam activated and inspired by the force of accumulation of the impression of the moral and immoral actions. Material quality born of one's karma or previous action (*Kammajarūpa*) is called *Upādinna* i.e., those that are produced depending upon conscious relation to matter or grasped by craving.

Thus, the life is compared to a flame and rebirth is transmitting of this flame from one to another. The flame of the life is continuous although there is an apparent break at the time of death. The continuity between the lives is the subtlest level of consciousness. In *Milindapañho*, there is a description of the transmigrating of the mind and matter on rebirth. King Milinda asked "When someone is reborn is he the same who died or different?" Ācārya Nāgasena replied, "Neither the same nor different. When a lamp is lit for the whole night the middle or last flame is not the same as the last act of previous birth nor entirely different."² The *Milindapañho* states that none of the milk product such as butter, curd and ghee are neither milk nor entirely other than milk. Further the king asked, "If anything passes from body to body would we not be free from all immoral actions? Nāgasena asked in reply, "If someone steals mangoes and the owner charges him, can he argue that mangoes stolen are different from the one planted by the owner? So when someone dies with craving and enters another existence he will not be free of past deeds good or bad."³ It is also stated that one cannot escape the consequences of *kamma*. It is the *kamma* that amounts the difference in our births. "As a man himself sows, so he himself reaps; no man inherits good or bad action of another man." The fruit of the same quality with the action, and,

tiko ayaṃ puriso, yadā kālaṅkaroti, paṭhavī pathavikāyaṃ anupeti anupagacchati, āpo āpokāyaṃ anupeti anupagacchati, tejo tejokāyaṃ anupeti anupagacchati, vāyo vāyokāyaṃ anupeti anupagacchati, ākāsaṃ indriyāni saṅkamanti. āsandipaṇ camā purisā matamā ādāya gacchanti. yāvālāhanā padāni paññāyanti. kāpotakāni aṭṭhīni bhavanti, bhassantā āhutiyo. dat-tupaññattam yadidaṃ dānaṃ. tesam tuccam musā vilāpo ye keci atthikavādam vadanti. bāle ca paṇḍite ca kā-yassa bhedā ucchijjanti vinassanti, na honti paraṃ maraṇā'ti-Dīgha Nikāya Samaññaphalasutta

- 2 *Kiṃ nu kho, mahārāja, añño so ahoṣi purime yāme paḍīpo, añño majjhime yāme paḍīpo, añño pacchime yāme paḍīpo* 'ti? "Na hi bhante, tam yeva nissāya sabbarattim paḍīpito" ti. "Evameva kho, mahārāja, dhammasantati sandahati, añño uppajjati, añño nirujjhati, apubbam acarimam viya sandahati, tena na ca so, na ca añño, purimaviññāṇe pacchimaviññāṇam saṅgahaṃ gacchati" ti- *Milindapañho* (Ed.) Swami Dwarikadas Shastri, Bauddha Bharati, Varanasi, 1998, p. 52.
- 3 *Rājā āha "bhante nāgasena, ko paṭisandahati" ti? Thero āha "nāmarūpaṃ kho, mahārāja, paṭisandahati" ti. "Kiṃ imaṃ yeva nāmarūpaṃ paṭisandahati" ti? "Na kho, mahārāja, imaṃ yeva nāmarūpaṃ paṭisandahati, iminā pana, mahārāja, nāmarūpena kammaṃ karoti sobhanaṃ vā pāpakaṃ vā, tena kammena aññaṃ nāmarūpaṃ paṭisandahati" ti. "Yadi, bhante, na imaṃ yeva nāmarūpaṃ paṭisandahati, nanu so mutto bhavissati pāpakehi kammehi" ti? Thero āha "yadi na paṭisandaheyya, mutto bhaveyya pāpakehi kammehi. Yasmā ca kho, mahārāja, paṭisandahati, tasmā na mutto pāpakehi kammehi" ti – Ibid., p.58*

good or bad, there is no escape from the action.

The closest associate of the life is the *jīvitindriya* (life-force). With the association of two, there emerges the heat (*usmā*), just like the arising of light depending upon the flame of the burning lamp. Thus, the continuity of *viññāṇa* with *jīvitindriya* is the surviving of life. In their absence it does not function at all.” Where three things are got rid of; life force, heat and consciousness, then does this body lie cast away, flung aside like unto senseless log of wood”⁴, says the Buddha. Life begins from the moment of *paṭisandhi*, which unites one state of existence with the other. It starts with the arising of a *paṭisandhi-citta* (uniting consciousness), due to the force of the accumulation of the resultants of moral and immoral actions. The same *kammic* force acts simultaneously in generating the seat of consciousness (*hadaya-vatthu*), the subtlest form of the material qualities the first atomic physical base. The two, though of diverse nature, are united together by the relation of co-born (*sahajāta-paccaya*) and being so, emerge into a physio-psychic form of personality of a man.⁵

There is a great role of *hadayavatthu* as a ground or base in the rebirth (*paṭisandhi*). *Hadayavatthu* is closely associated with *manodhātu* and *manoviññāṇadhātu*⁶. The tradition maintains that the *hadayavatthu* is the subtlest form of the material quality. The simile of touching the end of the fur of the newly born monkey on the surface of the cup of honey on the end of the fur is the simple indication of extremely subtle nature of the *hadayavatthu*. In the *Paṭṭhāna*, it is stated that “That material thing, based on which the mind-element and the mind-consciousness-element occur –that material thing is a condition by way of basis for the mind element and the mind-consciousness-element and what is associated therewith.”⁷

Interpretation of Dr. B R. Ambedkar on ‘Rebirth

In view of the above facts, one has to examine the position taken by Baba Saheb Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Dr. Ambedkar puts his stand in conformity with the modern scientific discoveries. He did not deny the doctrine of karma and rebirth but his interpretation amounted to denial of the doctrines in their traditional forms. While arguing under the titles ‘Rebirth of What’ and ‘Rebirth of Whom’ in his famous treatise ‘*The Buddha And His Dhamma*’, he arrives at the conclusion that after the dissolution of the body, i.e. death, the *mahābhūta*-s or the basic material qualities of which it is made of, the *mahābhūta*-s dissolve in their atmospheric store of *mahābhūta*-s and again at the time of conception in the mother’s womb and thereafter altogether separate set of the *mahābhūta*-s join together and form a new life in the form of a child. This process goes on and on. It means that the root cause behind the formation and dissolution of the body including consciousness (*citta*, *manas*) is the set of the *mahābhūta*-s, i. e. the material qualities. Thus Dr. Ambedkar reaches the same position as the Lokāyatika-s did.

Ambedkar’s concept of Rebirth, as discussed in his book “*The Buddha and His Dhamma*,” relates with the similar attitude as recorded in the *Mahāvedallasutta* of Majjhimanikāya (MN 43). The discourse mentions the basis of five faculties, heat, and vitality in order. It says heat and vitality depends

4 cf. *Majjhimanikaya* vol. I (Ed.) Bhikkhu J. Kashyap, Nalanda Edition, Nalanda, 1959, pp. 364-67.

5 “*Okkantikkhane nāmarupam aññamaññam saha jātapaccayena paccayo*”-*Paṭṭhana-pakarana* vol. I, (Ed.) Bhikkhu J. Kashyap, Nalanda Edition, Nalanda, 1961, p. 6.

6 “*Hadayameva manodhātumanoviññāṇadhātūnaṃ nissayattā vatthu cāti hadayavatthu. Tathā hi taṃ dhātudvayanissayabhāvalakkhaṇaṃ, tañca hadayakosabbhantare aḍḍhapasatamattaṃ lohitaṃ nissāya pavattati. Rūpakaṇḍe avuttassapi panetassa āgamato, yuttito ca atthibhāvo daṭṭhabbo. Tattha, taṃ rūpaṃ nissāya manodhātu ca manoviññāṇadhātu ca vattanti*”*yaṃ rūpaṃ manodhātuyā ca manoviññāṇadhātuyā ca taṃ sampayuttakānañca dhammānaṃ nissayapaccayena paccayo ti* - *Paṭṭhana-pakarana* vol. I, (Ed.) Bhikkhu J. Kashyap, Nalanda Edition, Nalanda, 1961, p. 6.

7 “*yaṃ rūpaṃ nissāya manodhātu ca manoviññāṇadhātu ca vattanti, taṃ rūpaṃ manodhātuyā ca manoviññāṇadhātuyā ca taṃ sampayuttakānañca dhammānaṃ nissayapaccayena paccayo*” -*Paṭṭhāna*, Vol. I, p.7.

on each other.⁸

Dr. B.R Ambedkar and the Lokāyatika

The doctrine of Lokāyata dismisses all gods, devas, and supernatural beings (Hirianna 193). It believes that there is no such creator or ultimate reality, who nourishes us. The theory also says that no life can be understood in terms of rebirth. According to this school, the universe is constituted out of the four elements: earth, water, heat and air. All realities consist of combinations of these four, and consciousness is such a compound, or rather a property of the elements combined in a particular way a living body.⁹

It is very hard to justify the idea of a life after death. Perhaps this was the reason Charvaka rejects this theory. How can one perceive the Brahman through one's senses? All those four elements are destroyed in their respective elements after death. It can be understood by an example that as betel areca, catechu, betel nut, lime etc. are not showing redness individually but when these altogether are chewed in the mouth, they are showing redness. In the same manner, when the four basic material qualities (*mahābhūtas*) create the life in which the consciousness also comes.

Conclusion

It amounts to the fact that Dr. Ambedkar brought the Buddhist Sāsana to the same position which the Buddha and His associates had avoided having called it Ucchedavāda (Annihilationism). But at the same time, there is a difference. Dr. Ambedkar calls his stand in conformity with the modern scientific discoveries. Thus, there lies a justification in his stand. The release of the *mahābhūta*-s from the body at the time of death does not mean Ucchedavāda (annihilation) as it was understood during the Buddha's time. Here the *mahābhūta*-s or basic material qualities are believed to remain in the atmosphere and do not altogether perish. Now, the question arises that which are the elements, separated from the body after the death of a human being. Quoting from the dialogue of Venerable Mahākoṭṭhita and Dhammasenāpati Sāriputta, Ambedkar says that the elements are namely 'Heat' or energy and 'consciousness', which are not arising from the body of a human being after the death. The dead body does not create energy but the energy, which comes out from the body after the death, merges in the energy of whole world. Thus, there is no rebirth of the soul but regeneration of the matter or element. There is the possibility of the fruit or retribution of the moral or immoral actions done by a person.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

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8 "pañcimāni, āvuso, indriyāni, seyyathidaṃ — cakkhundriyaṃ, sotindriyaṃ, ghānindriyaṃ, jivhindriyaṃ, kāyindriyaṃ. imāni kho, āvuso, pañcindriyāni kiṃ paṭicca tiṭṭhantī"ti?

"pañcimāni, āvuso, indriyāni, seyyathidaṃ — cakkhundriyaṃ, sotindriyaṃ, ghānindriyaṃ, jivhindriyaṃ, kāyindriyaṃ. imāni kho, āvuso, pañcindriyāni āyuṃ paṭicca tiṭṭhantī"ti.

"āyu panāvuso, kiṃ paṭicca tiṭṭhantī"ti?

"āyu usmaṃ paṭicca tiṭṭhantī"ti.

"usmā panāvuso, kiṃ paṭicca tiṭṭhantī"ti?

"usmā āyuṃ paṭicca tiṭṭhantī"ti. (*Mahāvedallasutta* of Majjhimanikāya, vol.I, PTS, p. 295)

9 Warder, A. K., Indian Buddhism, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 4th Reprint, 2017, p.40

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