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# Buddhism and Marxism Through the Perspective of Bhimrao Ambedkar

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## Abstract

*This paper examines the ideologies of Buddha and Marx through the comparative lens of Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891-1956), whose work “Buddha or Marx” (1956) provides a socio-political analysis of their similarities and differences. Ambedkar’s analysis encompasses the historical conditions that shaped both thinkers, their philosophical starting points, approaches to human liberation, and visions for creating societies based on fairness and equality. As both a scholar deeply influenced by Buddhism and a political activist in India, Ambedkar offers a unique assessment of Marxism and its application through the “dictatorship of the proletariat” model. While comparative studies of Buddhism and Marxism are not novel, this examination gains particular significance in contemporary discourse as it illuminates how doctrines transform under societal pressures and how philosophical traditions from different cultural contexts can inform modern approaches to social justice, equality, and human rights.*

**Keywords:** Bhimrao Ambedkar, Buddhism, Marxism, Comparative Philosophy, Social Justice, Political Philosophy, Religious Studies, Caste System, Equality, Tolerance.

## Introduction

The comparative study of philosophical and religious traditions offers valuable insights into the development of human thought across different cultural and historical contexts. This paper explores the intricate relationship between Buddhism and Marxism through the analytical framework provided by Bhimrao Ambedkar, a prominent Indian social reformer, political activist, and scholar. In his seminal work “Buddha or Marx” (1956), Ambedkar undertakes a systematic comparison of these two influential systems of thought, examining their origins, methodologies, and visions for human liberation and social transformation.

Ambedkar’s analysis is particularly significant because it emerges from his unique position as both a scholar deeply influenced by Buddhist philosophy and a political activist engaged in India’s struggle against the caste system. His comparative approach reveals how two traditions, separated by over two millennia and originating in vastly different cultural contexts, converge in their critiques of social inequality while diverging in their proposed solutions.

This paper examines Ambedkar’s comparative analysis through three main dimensions. First, it explores the historical and social contexts that shaped both Buddhism and Marxism, considering how each responded to the conditions of oppression and inequality in their respective eras. Second, it investigates the key similarities Ambedkar identifies between these traditions, including their shared commitment to addressing suffering, promoting equality, and recognizing class antagonism. Third, it analyzes the fundamental differences Ambedkar highlights,

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particularly regarding methodologies for social transformation, conceptions of the state, and approaches to spiritual and material development.

The significance of this comparative study extends beyond historical interest. As contemporary societies continue to grapple with issues of inequality, social justice, and human rights, the dialogue between Eastern and Western philosophical traditions offers fresh perspectives on addressing these challenges. By examining how Ambedkar navigates the intersection of religious and political philosophies, this paper contributes to ongoing discussions about the relevance of traditional wisdom in addressing modern social problems and the potential for cross-cultural philosophical exchange to enrich our understanding of human society and its transformation.

Through this analysis, the paper aims to demonstrate how Ambedkar's comparative framework not only illuminates the distinctive features of Buddhism and Marxism but also provides a model for how philosophical traditions can be engaged in constructive dialogue across cultural and temporal boundaries.

### **Research Methods**

This paper employs a critical analytical approach to examine Bhimrao Ambedkar's comparative study of Buddhism and Marxism. The methodology consists of three interconnected components: historical contextualization, comparative philosophical analysis, and socio-political critique.

### **Historical Contextualization**

The research begins by situating both Buddhism and Marxism within their respective historical contexts, acknowledging the significant temporal gap of 2,381 years between Buddha and Marx. This historical framing is essential for understanding how each philosophical system emerged as a response to specific social conditions and how their teachings were shaped by the cultural, economic, and political circumstances of their times. By examining the historical development of both traditions, this paper illuminates the contextual factors that influenced their formation and evolution.

### **Comparative Philosophical Analysis**

The core methodological approach involves a systematic comparison of the philosophical foundations, key concepts, and central tenets of Buddhism and Marxism as interpreted by Ambedkar. This comparative analysis identifies points of convergence and divergence between these traditions, focusing particularly on their:

1. Epistemological frameworks and approaches to understanding reality
2. Diagnoses of human suffering and social inequality
3. Proposed solutions for individual and collective liberation
4. Ethical principles and normative commitments

The comparative analysis draws primarily on Ambedkar's work "Buddha or Marx" (1956), supplemented by his broader writings on Buddhism and social reform. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how Ambedkar interpreted and synthesized these distinct philosophical traditions.

## **Socio-Political Critique**

The third methodological component involves a critical evaluation of the practical implications of both Buddhism and Marxism for addressing contemporary social issues. This critique examines how Ambedkar assessed the efficacy of Buddhist principles and Marxist theory in challenging systems of oppression, particularly the caste system in India. It also considers Ambedkar's critique of the Soviet model of socialism and his vision for integrating Buddhist ethics with democratic politics.

This critical approach extends beyond mere description to evaluate the strengths and limitations of both traditions as frameworks for social transformation. It also considers how Ambedkar's comparative analysis contributes to broader discussions about the relationship between religious and political philosophies in addressing issues of justice, equality, and human rights.

By combining these three methodological approaches, this paper offers a comprehensive examination of Ambedkar's comparative study of Buddhism and Marxism, situating his analysis within both historical and contemporary contexts while critically engaging with the philosophical and political implications of his work.

## **Similarities and Differences between Buddhism and Marxism from Ambedkar's Perspective**

### **Historical Context and Comparative Framework**

Ambedkar begins his comparative analysis by acknowledging the significant temporal and contextual differences between Buddhism and Marxism. He notes that Buddha and Marx are separated by 2,381 years, with Buddha establishing one of the world's great religions while Marx developed a political and economic ideology. Despite these apparent differences, Ambedkar argues that mapping the historical connections between these traditions illuminates the development of human thought, patterns of ideological inheritance, and the integration of diverse cultural and religious values.

To establish a foundation for comparison, Ambedkar distinguishes between Marx's enduring contributions and those aspects of his thought that have been subject to criticism or have been superseded by subsequent developments. He identifies Marx as the founder of scientific socialism, distinguishing it from utopian socialism, and examines how both Buddhism and Marxism emerged in response to social conditions marked by class divisions and inequality.

### **Key Similarities**

Ambedkar identifies three fundamental similarities between Buddhism and Marxism that remain relevant to contemporary discussions of social justice and human liberation.

#### *1. Concern for the Oppressed and Critique of Exploitation*

The first similarity lies in their shared concern for those suffering under systems of oppression. As a supporter of the Dalit Buddhist movement and an advocate for social and gender equality, Ambedkar emphasizes how both Buddha and Marx directed their attention to the needs of marginalized populations. Buddha critiqued how private property increases power for one class while bringing suffering to another, while Marx analyzed the alienation of labor resulting from private property relations. As Ambedkar notes, "the suffering of the poor due to oppression and exploitation brings Buddha and Marx closer together" (Ambedkar, *Selected Works*, p. 581).

The second similarity involves their shared critique of injustice and inequality, along with their vision for creating a more democratic and humane society. Ambedkar argues that Buddha anticipated many elements of later democratic thought, asserting that “He [Buddha] was born a democrat and he died a democrat” (Ambedkar, *Selected Works*, p. 587). Similarly, Marx, particularly in his earlier writings, advocated for democracy as a superior political system, describing it as “the solved puzzle of all forms of statehood... increasingly moving towards its real basis, towards the real, people-defined path of reality” (Marx and Engels, 1995, vol. 1, p. 349). Both thinkers sought to free people from inequality and enable them to control their own lives, though their specific approaches differed.

### 3. *Recognition of Class Antagonism*

The third similarity involves their recognition of class antagonism and the problems it creates for society. Both Buddha and Marx acknowledged the reality of class conflict, though they differed significantly in their assessment of its role and how it should be addressed. While Marx viewed class struggle as a driving force of social progress, Buddha identified it as a source of suffering that required transformation through changes in consciousness and the cultivation of compassion. Buddha believed that class antagonism could be overcome through human efforts to unify social classes and gradually eliminate caste and gender discrimination.

## **Key Differences**

Despite these similarities, Ambedkar identifies several crucial differences between Buddhism and Marxism regarding their approaches to social transformation and their visions of an ideal society.

### 1. *Means of Transformation*

The first significant difference concerns the means by which social transformation should be achieved. Ambedkar notes that while Buddhism and Marxism may share similar goals, they propose fundamentally different methods for reaching them. He writes: “The means adopted by the Communists are equally clear, short and swift. They are (1) Violence and (2) Dictatorship of the Proletariat... It is now clear what are the similarities and differences between Buddha and Marx. The end is common to both” (Ambedkar, *Selected Works*, p. 585).

It is important to note that Ambedkar’s understanding of Marxist methods is primarily derived from his observation of the Soviet model of socialism rather than from Marx’s original writings. While acknowledging that Buddhism is not absolutely opposed to the use of force when justice requires it, Ambedkar emphasizes Buddha’s preference for transforming human consciousness through education and moral development. He explains Buddha’s approach: “His method was to change the mind of man: to alter his disposition: so that whatever man does, he does it voluntarily without the use of force or compulsion. His main means to alter the disposition of men was his Dhamma and the constant preaching of his Dhamma” (Ambedkar, *Selected Works*, p. 596).

### 2. *Material and Spiritual Development*

The second difference emerges in Ambedkar’s assessment of how Buddhism and Marxism approach the relationship between material and spiritual development. While acknowledging the achievements of the Soviet regime in promoting social and gender equality, Ambedkar argues

that an economy based solely on public ownership is insufficient for human flourishing. He contends that spiritual liberation must accompany material progress:

“Man must grow materially as well as spiritually. Society has been aiming to lay a new foundation was summarised by the French Revolution in three words, Fraternity, Liberty and Equality. The French Revolution was welcomed because of this slogan. It failed to produce equality. We welcome the Russian Revolution because it aims to produce equality. But it cannot be too much emphasised that in producing equality society cannot afford to sacrifice fraternity or liberty. Equality will be of no value without fraternity or liberty. It seems that the three can coexist only if one follows the way of the Buddha. Communism can give one but not all” (Ambedkar, *Selected Works*, p. 597).

### 3. Conceptions of the State and Political Power

The third difference concerns their views on the state and political power. While Theravada Buddhism does not extensively address the origin and nature of the state, focusing instead on liberating people from the caste system, Ambedkar—as someone who applied Buddhist philosophy to political life—did not endorse the Marxist view of the eventual withering away of the state. According to Ambedkar, this view proved contradictory and difficult to achieve in practice (Ambedkar, *Selected Works*, p. 595).

Ambedkar also critiques Marx’s views on religion, particularly his attitude toward Christianity, and questions the way communists applied Marx’s views to smooth out differences between religions, including Christianity and Buddhism (Ambedkar, *Selected Works*, p. 595). This assessment reflects Ambedkar’s concern with preserving the distinctive ethical and philosophical contributions of Buddhism while engaging with modern political thought.

## Problems Raised from the Comparison of Buddhism and Marxism in Ambedkar’s Analysis

### Contextual Limitations of Ambedkar’s Comparative Framework

Ambedkar’s analysis of Buddhism and Marxism must be understood within the context of his own background and historical circumstances. As someone from a marginalized caste who fought persistently against the caste system, Ambedkar approached Marxism through the lens of Buddhist philosophy and certain non-Marxist Western philosophical and political perspectives. His understanding of Marxism in practice was primarily shaped by his observations of the Soviet model during the 1930s-1950s, which he characterized as “communist dictatorship.” Ambedkar died in 1956, long before the eventual collapse of the Soviet system in 1991, which Jacques Derrida would later describe as an expression of “playing Marx against Marx” that nullified “a latent force” (Derrida, 1994, p. 77).

These contextual factors help explain why Ambedkar’s comparison, while containing many objective and persuasive insights, also includes assessments that warrant further examination. Several key issues require particular attention: the means and paths to achieving social transformation, the concept of “abolishing private property” and its relationship to the Marxist theory of socioeconomic formation, and the Marxist view of the state and class struggle.

### Clarifying Marx’s Position on Human Emancipation

A more nuanced understanding of Marx’s original writings reveals that he did not limit human emancipation solely to the abolition of private property. Rather, he viewed this abolition as

merely one condition for subsequent processes of human emancipation in “political form” (Marx and Engels, 2000, vol. 42, p. 143). Marx’s ultimate vision was a society in which “the free development of each person is a condition for the free development of all.” This broader conception of emancipation extends beyond economic arrangements to encompass political and social liberation.

Similarly, Marx and Engels’ analysis of the state as an instrument of class oppression led them to envision its eventual withering away following the abolition of class distinctions. This perspective differs from the simplified interpretation that Ambedkar critiques, highlighting the importance of distinguishing between Marx’s original ideas and their implementation in specific historical contexts.

### **Cultural and Philosophical Exchange**

The comparison between Buddhism and Marxism represents just one example of the broader historical relationship between Eastern and Western philosophical traditions. As Karl Jaspers noted in his concept of the “Axial Age,” human cultural and knowledge centers emerged across civilizations in China, India, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece, creating “coordinates of development” that influenced subsequent eras. These cross-cultural philosophical exchanges have continued throughout history, with scholars comparing figures such as Confucius and Socrates, Mencius and Plato, Buddhism and Schopenhauer, and many others.

### **Messianic Elements and Transformative Visions**

Derrida characterized Marx’s doctrine as a “new messianic doctrine” with a spirit of “salvation” (Derrida, 1994, p. 132, 189) that shares certain features with religious traditions, including Buddhism. However, Marx’s approach was distinctive in establishing this salvific vision on the ground of material reality, aiming to liberate real people through practical means. This approach, according to Derrida, allows Marxist thought to “open the door to the absolute future of what is to come” (Derrida, 1994, p. 189).

Both Buddha and Marx were pioneers who challenged the injustices of their respective societies and outlined possibilities for human liberation. As Terry Eagleton argues in “Why Marx Was Right,” Marx’s unique contribution was identifying capitalism as a historical object, analyzing its laws of operation, and proposing how it might be transcended—similar to how Newton discovered the laws of gravity or Freud revealed the unconscious (Eagleton, 2011).

### **The Value of Comparative Analysis**

The comparative study of philosophical traditions across cultural and temporal boundaries remains valuable for several reasons. First, it helps trace the historical development of human thought and the patterns of ideological inheritance. Second, it promotes a culture of tolerance that acknowledges differences while encouraging dialogue, learning, and the assimilation of diverse values. As UNESCO’s Declaration of Principles on Tolerance (1995) affirms, such cross-cultural engagement is essential for promoting equality and fairness in relations between nations and peoples.

If there appears to be tension between Buddhism and Marxism in Ambedkar’s analysis, it might be better understood as reflecting a “culture of difference” and a “culture of tolerance.” As Ambedkar himself acknowledges, Marxism aims to “renovate the world” by bringing justice, equality, and democracy to all, regardless of status or caste. This recognition allows for distinguishing between what Derrida calls “Marx’s Marxism” and “distorted Marxism,” a

distinction that becomes particularly relevant after the collapse of the Soviet model.

### **Implications for Post-Colonial India**

Ambedkar's comparison of Buddha and Marx also carries implications for India's development path following independence from British colonialism. The newly independent nation faced the dual challenges of overcoming colonial legacies and addressing the persistent inequalities of the caste system. As Nandan (2016) observes, "Ambedkar being a rationalist thinker critically see the Hindu's traditional social system in order to build a just and egalitarian society. Ambedkar's philosophy revolved around how to avail the social justice for various sections of the Indian society as he tried to achieve it through the socio-economic and political participation among the depressed castes" (p. 20).

Ambedkar's comparative approach demonstrates his commitment as a political activist and thinker to addressing urgent social problems and achieving transformative ideals. Even while acknowledging the humanist values in Mahatma Gandhi's political doctrine, Ambedkar remained dissatisfied with the Ahimsa principle, arguing that "what the Buddha taught is something very vast: far beyond Ahimsa" (Ambedkar, *Selected Works*, p. 577-578). Furthermore, he criticized Gandhi for peacefully critiquing the caste system without making substantive efforts to eliminate it.

This critical stance reflects Ambedkar's broader commitment to practical social transformation rather than mere philosophical critique—a commitment that informs his comparative analysis of Buddhism and Marxism and continues to resonate in contemporary discussions of social justice and human rights.

### **Conclusion**

Bhimrao Ambedkar's comparative analysis of Buddhism and Marxism offers valuable insights that transcend geographical and temporal boundaries. His influence extends beyond India, inspiring marginalized communities worldwide in their struggles for justice, equality, and dignity. By examining these two philosophical traditions through Ambedkar's lens, we gain a deeper understanding of how different systems of thought can address common human concerns while maintaining their distinctive approaches.

Ambedkar's turn to Buddhism and his comparison with Marxism served to clarify the connections between two thinkers who, despite their vast separation in time and culture, shared a commitment to alleviating human suffering and creating more equitable societies. This comparative framework has contributed to the development of what scholars now term "Ambedkarism," a distinctive philosophical approach that centers on three core principles: the sacredness of human personality, women's liberation, and democracy as a state of mind. As Gagarin (2017) observes, Ambedkar identified the caste system as the fundamental cause of human dignity's destruction, linked women's emancipation to the abolition of caste distinctions, and argued that democracy must penetrate people's consciousness rather than merely operating at the level of state governance (pp. 72-75).

The methodological approach Ambedkar employed in surveying human knowledge systems bears resemblance to the thinking style of other influential figures who sought to integrate diverse philosophical traditions. Ho Chi Minh, for instance, questioned whether Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, Marx, Lenin, and Sun Yat-sen shared common features, concluding that they all sought happiness and prosperity for humanity while dedicating their lives to noble ideals.

This recognition of shared humanistic values across different philosophical and religious traditions reflects a commitment to intellectual openness and cross-cultural dialogue that remains relevant today.

Ambedkar's comparative analysis also highlights the ongoing relevance of both Buddhist ethics and Marxist critique in addressing contemporary social challenges. While these traditions differ in their methodologies and specific prescriptions, both offer resources for critiquing systems of oppression and envisioning more just alternatives. The dialogue between these traditions, as facilitated by thinkers like Ambedkar, demonstrates how philosophical engagement across cultural boundaries can enrich our understanding of human society and its potential transformation.

In an increasingly interconnected world where social inequalities persist alongside new forms of exploitation, Ambedkar's integration of Buddhist compassion with democratic politics and his critical engagement with Marxist analysis provide a model for how traditional wisdom can be brought into conversation with modern social theory. His work reminds us that the pursuit of justice, equality, and human dignity requires both ethical vision and practical engagement with the material conditions of human existence.

By continuing to explore the intersections between diverse philosophical traditions, we honor Ambedkar's legacy while developing new resources for addressing the complex challenges of our time. The comparative study of Buddhism and Marxism through Ambedkar's perspective thus serves not only as an historical analysis but as a living contribution to ongoing efforts to create more just and humane societies.

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