

# Dr. Ambedkar and Dalits Conversion in Buddhism: A Study

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**Abstract**—Dr. B.R. Ambedkar is generally considered a leader of masses especially the dalits or Untouchables, as they were known previously due to their low miserable condition in the Indian caste system. Dalits under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar converted into Buddhism. Ambedkar found solace in the teachings of Buddha. He embraced Buddhism as a religious solution to the problems of dalits. Dr. Ambedkar preferred Buddhism because of two reasons. Firstly Buddhism has its roots in the Indian soil and Secondly it is the religion of ethics, morality and learning which has no place for the caste system and he wanted to liberate dalits from the degrading humiliations imposed by the Indian caste system sanctified by Hindu religion. This article is focused on the conditions which compelled him to choose conversion in Buddhism as the final path for bringing honor and dignity and social change in the condition of Dalits.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Caste system, Dalits.

## Introduction

‘Dalit conversion’ refers, at first glance, and in its most likely usage, to the mass conversion of dalits to Buddhism in 1956 and afterwards, as well as to Islam, Christianity and other religions at various other times, both before and after 1956.

By leading a mass conversion on 14 October 1956 and by reconstructing Buddha’s Dhamma, Ambedkar has made a significant contribution to the World of Buddhism. Its significance, however, needs to be understood in a proper perspective. One way to understand it is to consider how it is based on the tradition and how it deviates from it. But it is not proper or is at least insufficient to consider Ambedkar’s reconstruction of Buddhism as isolated from what has happened to Buddhism outside India, or to be more precise, outside Ambedkarite Buddhism, in the last century. Many orthodox followers of Ambedkarite Buddhism follow it parochially. They think that Ambedkar’s pioneering restatement of Buddhism was complete, authentic and final. But this was not true. Re-understanding Buddhism was a problem faced by many Buddhist thinkers in different parts of the world. They share some common concerns and responses. Ambedkar’s contribution needs to be understood and appreciated on this world map of shared concerns and responses

Ambedkar was born in 1891 to a poor but educated family of Mahars, the largest Untouchable caste in Maharashtra. Untouchables (Dalits) were excluded from many aspects of ordinary Hindu life, usually barred from entering temples, going to school, or even living within the boundaries of rural villages. Throughout his life he suffered and seen oppression of dalit communities through his own eyes, somehow he got educational opportunities and thus gain knowledge regarding the cause behind this miserability of dalits, which was unfortunately the religious tenets and the caste system which has instilled untouchability and discrimination in the society. Certain privileges and deprivations to different caste people were due to this caste system and thus deprive people of lower castes of their basic human rights. Due to the knowledge which he gained during his higher studies under world renowned professors such as John Dewey, Proff. Seligman and other intellectuals during his study in America, Britain and Germany. He came to an understanding that this caste system is essentially a social menace, a system of social exploitation by the higher castes to exploit lower castes which is sanctified by religion and can be cured to a level.

The caste system according to Babasaheb Ambedkar is an integrated part of the Hindu civilization and culture and therefore there are always fend and conspiracy of caste to enslave the weaker section. According to him to get economic equality, it is necessary to compete, bargain to fight, but caste prejudices, ultimately result in conflict and conspiracies to suppress the weak. They result in vested interest and monopoly of only one or two higher castes. The unity of the country is therefore blown up by the caste system and there is no coherence. (A.R. Desai, 1959: p.244)

The 2001 census puts India’s Buddhist population at eight million, more than 90 percent converts from the untouchable communities; some scholars suggest that the number of uncounted or undeclared Buddhist’s is around three million. Buddhist communities are scattered across the nation, with the largest concentration in the state of Maharashtra.

What prompted Ambedkar to abandon Hinduism and embrace a different religion was his realization that Hindu society cannot annihilate the caste system and give equal and

respectable status to the people of the downtrodden castes. Naturally he looked at the Buddha as giving a solution to this problem. In his image, the Buddha was essentially a critic of Brahmanism (Hindu religion) in general and of the caste system in particular.

Throughout his life Ambedkar made efforts to reform the philosophical basis of Hinduism. But he got convinced that Hinduism will not modify its disposition towards the untouchables. He led the movements like Chavdar talab, for right to have access to drinking water, Kalaram Mandir for right to enter the temples and also the burning of Manusmriti, as symbolic of the rejection of religiously ordained caste hierarchy. The resistance to these led to his decision to leave the Hindu fold, which is dominated by the brahminical values of Varna. So, he searched for an alternative to Hinduism. After careful consideration, he adopted Buddhism and asked his followers to do the same. His conversion to Buddhism meant reassertion of his faith in a religion based on humanism. Ambedkar argued that Buddhism was the least obscurantist religion. It appreciated the spirit of equality and liberty. Removal of injustice and exploitation was the goal of Buddhism. By adopting Buddhism, the untouchables would be able to carve out a new identity for themselves. Since Hinduism gave them nothing but sufferings, by renouncing Hinduism, the untouchables would be renouncing the stigma of untouchability and bondage attached to them. To live a new material life, a new spiritual basis consistent with the liberal spirit was essential, Buddhism would provide this basis.

#### **Ambedkar's conception of Buddhism:**

Ambedkar's conception of Buddhism incorporated a vision of a passionate society and social liberation, far beyond the introspective caricature that some have of Buddhism. So it is natural that an Indian Buddhist movement, rooted in the most oppressed segment of society, would see the oneness of personal development and social transformation.

The need for social morality and rationality, a religion that was grounded in human experience and reason, that could adapt to changing times, that called for constant questioning through the application of knowledge and reason, that is what, in the dalit view, set Buddhism apart from the superstitions of Hinduism, which were hindering the progress of dalits since Centuries.

Traditionally only a bhikshu could give ordination to anyone even to become an upasaka. Ambedkar in the mass conversion ceremony, when he himself was ordained as upasaka, gave ordination to thousands of his followers to become upasaka. As sangharakshita observes: "Indeed by demonstrating that an upasaka no less than a bhikshu could administer the refuges and precepts Ambedkar was reminding both the old Buddhists and the new that those who lived as bhikshus and those who lived as upasakas and upasikas was only a difference, not a division..." (Sangharakshita: 139)

On may 27, 2007 in Mumbai, on the occasion of 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dr. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism, more than 1 lakh dalits and tribal's converted to Buddhism. It seems that Buddhism has appeared as the last resort to save themselves from the atrocities attached their caste status. On the occasion, A landless laborer who came from a distant village for conversion asserted that conversion is his only hope to live a life of dignity in India. He painfully voiced that "I am 45 and I don't want my children to suffer my fate."

'Is Buddhism a religion?' Ambedkar raised this question and answered it by saying that Buddhism is Dhamma and not a religion. The question Ambedkar was facing was not unusual, as Ambedkar himself pointed out that some European theologians refused to recognize the Buddha's Dhamma as religion (Ambedkar (1974):IV.I.2.5). Buddhism in the modern world had an encounter with theologians advocating Semitic conception of religion, who denied the status of religion to Buddhism.

There was twofold response to this problem from the Buddhist side. On the one hand the Buddhists accepted the change but not with a sense of inferiority but with pride. Unlike Christianity or Islam, Buddhism is based not on uncritical faith, dogma, and a belief in god etc., but on a rational approach and emphasis on one's own experience and there was nothing to feel inferior about. On the other hand, Buddhists acknowledged the wider conception of religion which was more fitting to Buddhism than to other religions.

We find both these types of response in Ambedkar. In his 1950 article "Buddha and the future of his religion", he showed how Buddhism fulfils the criteria of ideal religion (Ambedkar (1980)) and in *The Buddha and his Dhamma* he elucidated how the Buddha's Dhamma radically differs from the religion (Ambedkar (1974): III.IV.2).

We can trace a similar dual approach in a few other modern Buddhist thinkers.

Narada Thero, a Monk Scholar of Srilanka (1898-1983) in his work *The Buddha and his Teachings* raised the question whether Buddhism is a religion. He said,

Buddhism cannot be strictly called a religion, because it is neither a system of faith and worship nor "the outward act or form by which men indicate the existence of a god or gods..."... However if by religion is meant... a system of deliverance from the ills of life, then certainly Buddhism is a religion of religions. (Narada (1988): 290)

Dr. Ambedkar should have thought that a changeover to Buddhism and the creation of a modern Sangha on Buddhist lines might solve the crucial problem of the scheduled castes. As intellectuals might think that mere religious formalities of conversion will not satisfy a modern mind, that the roots of moral behavior in society lie much deeper in human psychology and that outward forms are irrelevant to it. But speaking about the generality of men it may still prove to be a

potent psychological influence for their progress and that outward form may after all mould the inner soul and lead to social happiness which is the ultimate end of both law and religion.

Ambedkar steadfastly held the image of a society which is free from injustice and exploitation. Therefore, he repeatedly announced that an ideal society will be based on liberty, equality and fraternity. What are the forces operating against these three principles? Casteism and communalism on the one hand and economic exploitation on the other continue to provide strength to the prevalent inequality in the Indian society, Ambedkar fought for a society free from caste-dominance and class-exploitation. So long as these two machines of exploitation- caste and class are in existence, Ambedkar's thought would be relevant as an inspiration in the fight against them.

### Conclusion

Ambedkar throughout his life fight against caste system and tried many sorts of strategies in order to bring reforms in Indian society. So that his very concerned section dalits can live with honor and dignity. But he found the caste system too rigid. In order to get rid from the caste system for him and his fellow caste people he desired for a religion, in which caste system will have no place, He was looking for such a religion which will provide all its followers liberty, equality and fraternity, the fundamental principles of any true humanistic religion. He searched for it through careful observation of all dominant religions for about 20 years and choose Buddhism for his dalits brethren. His conversion to Buddhism was for a purpose; it was to provide a way to liberate himself and his people from the misery of untouchability and discrimination and thereby to bring about a social change. It was not for the liberation of just an individual but of people seeking equality and self-respect. Buddhism does view all men as equally capable of enlightenment and therefore as equal as it has no place for caste system and gives importance to morality and humanity. This is clearly what attracted Ambedkar to it along with the obvious other qualification of being an Indian religion.

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