Untouchability and Religious Conversion: Ambedkar’s Conception

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Abstract
The liberty in Hindu religion is absent for untouchable masses. To Ambedkar, freedom of mind is the real freedom. In Hindu religion none can have freedom of speech. Those mind is not free he is a slave. The Vedas, Smritis are responsible for degradation of inequality. In Hindu society only Caste Hindus are vested the liberty. The caste is a state of mind. It is a disease of mind. Inter caste dinning and intermarriage is not enough to annihilate the caste system from Hindu society. To annihilate the castes and untouchability from the Hindu society the change of religion is the only antidote. The untouchables are separate from the Caste Hindus as Muslims and Christians. As a separate element religious conversion is essential. The change of religion means change of name. To call on self a Muslim, a Christians, a Buddhist or a Sikh is not merely a change of religion but also a change of life. The Untouchables had no education, no property and no arms. The men are eligible to make progress or development while an animal cannot. The improvement of the untouchables is not possible without religious change. The conversion of religion is a gateway to abolish the caste system.

Keywords: Caste, Hinduism, Buddhism, Conversion, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.

Introduction: In this paper an attempt has been made to explore Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s views on Hinduism and Buddhism. Dr. Ambedkar has mentioned some instances in his life of incidents which were inhuman treatment over him from the Caste Hindu. These incidents are explained in his article entitled ‘Conversion is necessary for Your Emancipation and Advancement’. He pointed out that that no barber was prepared to cut his hair. His father was an Army Subedar and lived in the cantonment. After retirement of his father from service on pension they shifted to Satara to live. The Government started ‘Famine Relief Employment’ in Goregaon and Ambedkar’s father was appointed as a pay-master to disburse wages to the workers. His elder sister was prepared to cut hair, but on barber was prepared to cut her hair. Once day, Dr. Ambedkar and his sisters with brothers were going to Goregaon where his father was appointed as cashier to disburse wages to the workers. It was decided that a servant would receive them from the railway station, but nobody went there to receive them. The station Master asked them to know what caste they were belonged, the answer was Mahar caste. No bullock cart driver was willing to drive the from railway station to Goregaon. Finally a cart man agreed to take them in his cart with a condition that he would not drive them. It was not difficult to drive by Ambedkar. Next day early in the morning they reached at Goregoan. He has mentioned another incident that on a promise with Maharaja of Boroda he was appointed as Military Secretary at Boroda. The Maharaja of Boroda could not arrange to live for Ambedkar. In the city of Boroda neither Hindu nor a Muslim was prepared a rent out a house to him. Giving himself a Parsi name ‘Adalji Sorabji’ he started to stay in a Parsi Dharmasala. On the second day he was assaulted by angry men and Parsis and asked him who are you? Ambedkar replied ‘I am
a Hindu’. Ambedkar wished to learn Sanskrit but restriction was imposed over him by the Hindu religion. He expressed in the Conference to change this degraded and disgraceful existence into a golden life conversion is necessary. He had advised to his followers to convert for the betterment of life.

I: Ambedkar’s Views on Hinduism and Buddhism: In his article entitled “What Way Emancipation” Ambedkar declared that “I solemnly assure you that I will not die a Hindu”, at Yeola, District of Nasik, Maharashtra, on 13th October, 1935. On 30th and 31st May, 1936 at Dadar, Bombay, Dr. Ambedkar convened a conference. The conference was related to conversion in Buddhism and assess the support from the downtrodden classes for conversion movement. Some slogans were displayed on the pandal. Man is not for religion, religion is for man.

- To become humane, convert yourselves.
- To get organised, convert yourselves.
- To achieve strength, convert yourselves.
- To secure equality, convert yourselves.
- To get liberty, convert yourselves.
- To make your domestic life happy, convert yourselves.

To him, the untouchables must claim some important rights which are essential for their betterment of development life such as Right to enrol the children in Government Schools; Right to take water from public wells and Right to take a marriage procession with the groom on a horse-back. The concept of sympathy is absent in Hindu religion. The Hindus has no sense of brotherhood among themselves. The Untouchables are treated worse than foreigners. The Caste Hindus have no sympathy towards the untouchables. They are not brother to each others. They are two opposite castes. None can say they are brother. The Caste Hindus and Muslims are helpful to each other in various cases of local boards, legislative councils and business, except the Untouchables masses. The concept of equality is absent in Hindu religion. There is concrete inequality in Hindu religion. The Untouchables cannot interline and intermarriage with the Caste Hindus. The Hindu religion does not recognise the right to equality for all Varnas. The Untouchables are treated by the caste Hindus as leper. The condition of the Untouchables is worse than the leper. The majority of Hindus believes that the Untouchability is a stigma on Hindu religion. The inequality and injustice are the Principles of the Hindu religion. The Caste Hindus certainly say that ‘get educated yourselves, be clean, and then we will touch you, we will treat as equal’.

To Ambedkar, the conditions of American Negroes were just the same with untouchables of India. Some American white social reformers tried to emancipate the slavery of the Nigroes but no social reformers from India tried to annihilate the caste system from Hindu society. The main object of the conversion movement is to achieve social freedom, equality and fraternity. These trinity principles can be obtained through religious conversion, inter-dining and inter-caste marriages. The Chaturvarna system from the Hindus society must be removed and uprooted by an elaborate religious conversion. The Hindu religion gives equal treatment to the Muslims and Christians, but does not recognise the equal treatment to the Untouchables. His thought was that the conversion of religion will bring healthier relationship between the Untouchables as well as Hindus. Some Caste Hindus advise with saying that “Brothers, live clean, educate yourselves, stand on your own feet etc.” On the 28th August 1937, a large public meeting of the Depressed Classes was held at the Municipal Hall, Bandra, under the Presidentship of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.
In this conference he advised to his followers that “Gods in Hindu religion should not be worshipped, should not observe the Hindu religious festivals, should not observe the vows of Hindu religion, Hindu religious practices such as fast and other related issues should not be observe”. On December 26, 1939, Dr. Ambedkar delivered a welcome address at Belgaum university. In the conference, he stated that the Caste Hindus are responsible for the sin of Untouchability. Upliftment of Harijan is more necessary than the winning of Swaraj.

In his article entitled ‘Why I Like Buddhism’ Dr. Ambedkar preferred Buddhism because he argued that Buddhism teaches Prajna (understanding as against superstition and superstition and supernaturalism; Buddhism teaches Karuna (Love) and Buddhism teaches Samata (equality). Dr. Ambedkar declared that he would embrace Buddhism in October, 1956. The Buddha Sangha is a Communist Organisation. Like Marxism, the Buddhism believes in abolition of private property. Social welfare is a gospel of Buddhism. In his article entitled ‘The Tide of Buddhism would never Recede in India’ Ambedkar pointed out that “Hinduism believes in soul. There is no soul in Buddhism. Hinduism believes in Chaturvarna and the Caste System. Buddhism has no place for the Caste System and Chaturvarna”. He observed that the Buddhism is more rational than other religion. His main objection was against Hinduism. The Hinduism believes in Chaturvarna system of the society and it ignored equality, fraternity and liberty of men. The Buddhism is based on morality.

Dr. Ambedkar presided over the meeting held on 28th August, 1937. The meeting passed a resolution that “as resolved at the Bombay Presidency Mahar Conference our brothers and sisters should not observe the Hindu religious festivals, the religious rites of Hinduism such as vows, etc. and religious practices such as fasts”. On 29th September, 1950, Dr. Ambedkar, Law Minister, Government of India, told at Bombay’s Buddha Temple at Worli appealed to people to embrace Buddhism. To him, Mahomedan invasion in India is the main cause for declining of Buddhism. There is no purity of mind in Hinduism. There are barriers between man and man. India can never be prosperous within inequality of Hinduism. He stated that “To end all these troubles, India must embrace Buddhism. Buddhism is the only religion is based upon ethical principles and teaches how to work for the good and well-being of the common man”.

II: Ideas of Ambedkar on Jainism, Sikhism, Muslim and Christianity: He has analysed the basic theme of several religion against for the embracement of Buddhism.

**Jainism:** According to Dr. Ambedkar, “Ahimsa preached by Jainism is extreme and impractical”. ‘Ahimsa Paramo Dharma’ is the motto of Jainism. Brahmanism believes will to kill animals in sacrifices. Jainism does not believe will never to kill. Buddha treated the Ahimsa as a way of life, not as a matter of rule. Buddha opposed the killing of animals in sacrifice. Buddha said “love all so that you may not wish to kill any”. Jainism adopted Ahimsa as a rule, not as a way of life. Jainism denied the broken men. For this reason Dr. Ambedkar rejected Jainism.

**Sikhism:** At the beginning Dr. Ambedkar wanted to embrace Sikhism for his conversion. There were two reasons for his willing to receive the Sikhism. Firstly, “If the depressed classes became Sikh they remain in their Hindu culture but if they join Islam or Christianity they not only go out of the Hindu religion but also of the Hindu culture”. Secondly, “The Depressed Classes who were denied military service by the British could gain army carrier under Sikhism”.

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Muslim: Dr. Ambedkar denied embracing Islam because of its polygamy marriages. The polygamy marriage is the main cause of the miserable conditions of the Muslim women. There is no organised movement among the Mussalmans to bring about social change and eradication of social evils. To him, Christianity or Islam was one of the causes for expulsion from the caste among the Hindus. Muslim religion is foreign religion. Muslim rulers invaded India and killed the Buddhists. The Buddhists were bound to embrace the Muslim religion. For this reason, Ambedkar did not consider to embrace the Muslim religion.

Christianity: Dr. Ambedkar raised objections against Indian type of Christian society. To him, South-Indian Christians believes castes system in Churches. They lagged behind politically. If down-trodden or Mahar boys became Christian, they must be lost their scholarships. The Christians people never fought against social injustice. The fathers of the various Church institutions claimed themselves as Brahmin. The Christianity believes in social discrimination. For this reasons Ambedkar rejected Christianity.

According to Dr. Ambedkar, “Hinduism is the latest development of social thought in India”. He believed that Buddhism faded away from India because of the rise of Vaishnavaitism and Saivaism; and the Muslim invasion in India. Sultan Allauddin marched into Bihar and killed over 5,000 Bhikkus. Dr. Ambedkar stated as “I believe that religion is necessary for the mankind. When religion ends the society would perish too. After all no Government can safeguard and discipline mankind as niti or dharma can”. Buddha’s view was that worship of idols is not necessary for deity and sacrifces. His opinion was that “As I venerate the Buddha, the Enlightened One, there is no need to worship any other deity”. Ashok’s embracing to Buddhism is the cause for the decline of Hinduism. Brahmins had tried to preserve the Hindu religion in India. Both Brahmin and their well wisher Kshatriyas had organised a united Brahmin- Kshatriya axis against Buddhism. Lord Buddha’s opinion was that “To end all these troubles, India must embrace Buddhism. Buddhism is the only religion based ethical principles and teaches how to work for the good and well-being of the common man”.

According to Ambedkar “it is a criminal to collect money in the name of religion and waste of money”. The untouchables and Backward Classes are against Hinduism because of its doctrine of graded inequality. On three grounds they preferred Buddhism. i. Buddhism is not a religion which is alien to India; ii. The doctrine of Buddhism is social equality; iii. Buddhism is rational religion and there can be no space for superstition.

III: The Buddhist Society of India: The Buddhist Society of India was registered by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar on 4th May, 1955 in the office of the Registrar of companies, Mumbai. On May 8th 1955 a meeting of the Buddhist Society was held regarding on its function at Nare Park, Bombay. Dr. Ambedkar made a formal announcement of the establishment of this society for propagation of Buddhism.

Aims and Objectives of the Buddhist Society of India:

1. To promote the spread of Buddhism in India.
2. To establish temples for Buddhist worship.
3. To establish schools, colleges for religious and scientific subjects.
4. To establish orphanages, hospitals and relief centres.
5. To start Buddhist Seminaries for the preparation of workers for the spread of Buddhism.
6. To promote comparative study of all religions.
7. To undertake publication of Buddhist Literature and to issue leaflets and pamphlets for giving a true understanding of the Buddhist religion to the common mass.
8. To create a new order of priests, if it becomes necessary to do so.
9. To establish a press or presses for the purposes to carry on the work of publication.
10. To hold gatherings and conferences of the Buddhists of India for common action and to establish fellowship.²⁰

V: Dr. Ambedkar’s Conversion to Buddhism

A library should be established. There would be also temples and classrooms and dormitories for students, teachers and researchers.²¹

On 14th October, 1956, Dr Ambedkar renounced Hinduism and embraced Buddhism. On 15th October, 1956, he delivered his speech in Marathi relating to embraced Buddhism. He said there are so many problems after conversion to the Buddhism. He hoped that he will get the political rights. He confidently said that there are so many solutions ‘in the Pocket of my coat’. He proved his promise i.e. “Though I am born as a Hindu I will not die as a Hindu”.²² To him, religion is absolutely essential for the development of human beings. As a member of the Executive Council of Delhi he appealed to the Viceroy Lord Linlithgow for financial assistance for the down-trodden classes relating to women education, hostels etc. With the help of Viceroy Lord Linlithgow sixteen students were sent to England for higher education. Brahmans system is harmful for human beings. Varna system of Hindu religion is responsible for inequality in Hindu society. Buddhist religion welcomes to embrace the religion from various countries and castes. Rivers flow separately in their own region but when they meet at sea then they lose their identity. Buddhist Sangh is like an ocean. Buddhist Sangh believes that all are equal. It is difficult to differ between the water of Ganga and Mahanadi. Similarly, when we will join with Buddha Sangh, we will lose our caste and we will be equal. According to him, “No man in the world shoulders as much responsibility as do I. If I get a long life, I will fulfil my planned work (shouts of ‘Long lives Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar’).²³

Brahmins used to term the Lord Buddha as ‘Bho Gautam’ means ‘Are Gautam’. Buddhism was disappeared by the invasion of Muslims and so many Buddhists were killed by the Muslim rulers. As a result, the Buddhist Bhikhu left India and went to Tibet, China. Dr. Ambedkar wanted to survive the Buddhism on the plea that it believes the three principles of equality, liberty and fraternity. It has no stigma at all. Both Hindu and Christian religion preaches that the God is the creator of all nature such as sky, air, moon, sun etc. Buddhist religion does not believe in supernatural and super human. To emancipate the Depressed Classes the Buddhist religion is essential for human beings. General Secretary of the Maha Bodhi Society of India, Reverend D. Valisinha said that the 14th October, 1956 was a memorable day in the history of modern India. Dr. Ambedkar and his near about 500,000 followers recited Trisarana Panchasheel and embraced Buddhism. On 14th October, 1956, the sky was overflowing by the slogans of “Begawan Buddha Ki Jai” (Victory of Lord Buddha).²⁴ Both men and women were participated in conversion ceremony. Justice U Chan Htoon, Supreme Court, Union of Burma, Rangoon wrote a letter dated 22nd October, 1956 and he asserted that “Dr. Ambedkar’s Conversion is towards re-establishment of Buddha Sasan in India”.²⁵ According to Dr. Ambedkar, religion is for man and not man for religion.²⁶

Dr. Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism was published in details in ‘Prabuddha Bharat’ weekly, 29th September, 1956. His declaration relating to conversion to Buddhism published through a statement from New Delhi. Dr. Ambedkar had written a letter, dated 24th September, 1956 by requesting to Reverend Bhikhu Chandramani Kushenara, Gorakhpur Dist, and U.P. to
perform the Conversion Ceremony. Reverend Bhikhu Chandramini was the oldest Buddhist Monk in India. In this regard ‘Prabuddha Bharat’ published a special supplement on 12th October, 1956. The Ceremony occasion was open to all without castes, creed, religion, sex etc. It was informed that the registration for conversion will begins from 11th October 1956. The volunteers were directed to come in white half pant and white shirt. Mahasthavir Chandramani recited Trishara. To spread the Buddhism all over world a group of scholars would be engaged all over the world in translating Buddhist texts in Pali and English and the translating papers would be published by the seminary. A library should be established. There would be also temples and classrooms and dormitories for students, teachers and researchers. Dr. Ambedkar with five thousand of his followers recited Trisarana and Pancha-sila and publicly embraced Buddhism. The followers raised slogan with Bhagaban Buddha- ki Jai’. Trisharan recited as Buddham saranam gacchami (I follow the Buddha), Dhammam saranam gacchami (I follow the Dhammam) and Sangham saranam gacchami (I follow the Sangha). The Buddha religion is “Bahujan hitay Bahujan sukhay, Lokanucampay, Dhamma adi Kalyanam, Madhya Kalyanama, Paryavasan Kalayanam”.

A World Buddhists Council Conference was held on 20th November 1956 at Kathmandu. Dr. Ambedkar delivered the lecture enetitle on “Buddha or Karl Marx”. This lecture was delivered in the palace of the King of Nepal. Dr. Ambedkar talked on “Non-violence in Buddhism”. Marxian Communism started with the exploitation to the poor by the rich. The exploitation of property by rich is the cause of sorrow. In order to prevent property and exploitation, removal of private property is necessary. In Marxian view, “the state is an instrument to exploit the Depressed Classes”. Marxists believe that ‘the state wills wither way’. A communist society will establish in the socialist society by the state owner and control. The land must belong to the state, the industry must belong to the state, and no private owner might intervene. The abolition of private is the essence of Marxian communism. Buddha religion is also believes in Communism. Buddha religion believes in abolition of private property. Marxian communism believes in violence method, but Buddhian concept of communism believes in non-violence.

Conclusion: Morality, equality, liberty and fraternity are the mottos of the Buddhism and for this reason he embraced the Buddhism and renounced his own religion. His vision was to establish a ‘just society’ or an egalitarian society. The system of caste in society is the poisonous issue and he had bitterly experience about it. Caste is the orthodox concept of Hindu society where there is no liberty, equality and fraternity. The Shudras were not Shudras, they were solar race. To Dr. Ambedkar, the new social order and progress cannot be achieved unless we cannot destroy the caste system. He propagated the abolition of sub-caste, introduce inter-caste marriage and inter dining system, one standard book of Hindu religion, renunciation of Hinduism and embrace Buddhism etc. He inserted some articles in the Constitution by which constitutional protection is given to the down-trodden or dalits. The fundamental rights, Directive Principles of State Policy, preventive detention, abolition of untouchability, equality before law and equal protection of law etc. have been included in the Constitution. Ambedkar had struggle in his whole life to uplift the down-trodden and weaker sections of the society. Dr. Ambedkar in his work “Annihilation of Caste” pointed out that “Make every man and woman free from the thraldom of the Shastras, cleanse their minds of the pernicious notions founded on the Shastras, and he or she will inter-dine and inter marry without your telling him or her so. He wanted to remove hindrances of the Brahmin’s priesthood cultures which are evil for society.
References:
2. Ibid. p.117.
3. Ibid. P. 125.
4. Ibid. P.135.
5. Ibid. P. 160.
7. Ibid. P.515.
8. Ibid. P. 515.
11. Ibid. P. 410.
13. Ibid. P. 318.
16. Ibid. P. 408.
17. Ibid. P. 410.
23. Ibid. P. 540.
24. Ibid. P. 546.
28. Ibid. P.553.