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## AMBEDKAR AND BUDDHISM: RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND PRACTICES AMONG NEO-BUDDHIST IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

Ambedkar argued that the purpose of religion is to explain the origin of the world, whereas the purpose of "Dhamma" is to reconstruct the world. He believed that Buddhism was not merely a religion but also a great social doctrine. Ambedkar got convinced by the logical, empirical, humanistic and pragmatic teaching of the Buddha. He observed that besides ahimsa, the Buddha taught many other things such as social, intellectual, economic and political freedom. It would be hard to find a religious teacher to compare with Buddha whose teachings embrace so many aspects of social life and whose doctrines are so modern and whose primary concern was to give salvation to people during their life on earth and not to promise it to them in the heaven after they are dead. According to Ambedkar, religion must be judged by social standards based on social ethics. He linked religion with the social wellbeing of the people. Choosing Buddhism over other faiths by Ambedkar has always been an issue of introspection within academic discourses. This paper presents an analysis of the why Ambedkar decided to embrace Buddhism, why conversion to Buddhism, and why he appealed to the untouchables to embrace Buddhism.

**KEYWORDS:** Ambedkarism, Buddhism, Dhamma, Conversion, Caste, Critical Knowledge, Dalit, Liberation.

### INTRODUCTION

Religious identity is the set of beliefs and practices generally held by an individual by adherence to codified beliefs, rituals and study of ancestral or cultural traditions, writings, history, mythology, as well as faith and mystic experience. It is the awareness of oneself about belonging to a particular religious group. It is argued that in modern times the assertion of the religious identity becomes even more firm. This is because of the political dimension which gets associated with the religious identity. For instance, Ashutosh Varshney in his work 'Ethnic conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India' has argued that the modernist (like Colley) claim that "...modernity changed the meaning of identities by bringing the masses into a larger, extralocal framework of consciousness. It made identities and communities wider and more institutionalized"<sup>1</sup>.

Ambedkar, himself argued that the purpose of religion is to explain the origin of the world, whereas the purpose of “Dhamma” is to reconstruct world. Clearly when he talks of the ‘Dhamma’ his understanding of the religion acquires a particular meaning which is not just religion for sake of religiosity but religion as a source of reconstructing identity, as a source of emancipation and of reclaiming dignity. Thus, for Ambedkar Dhamma within Buddhism was a world-transforming religion. It was meant to challenge not only Brahmanism (as the main exploiting system of traditional Indian society), but also to Marxism which claimed itself to be the social ideology against oppressive regime.

### **Understanding conversion to Buddhism at theoretical level:**

Ambedkar considered Brahmanism as the root of social evil and a reason of India's backwardness. Ambedkar made his first definitive announcement that he was leaving the fold of Hinduism in 1935 in Depressed Class Conference held at Yeola, in 1935 where he stated that he will not “...die a Hindu”. It is interesting to note here that by this statement (I will not die a Hindu) he completely cuts off his umbilical cord with Hinduism. This itself was revolutionary because unlike Phule, who tried to claim Kshatriya status for the untouchables and thereby sanskritising untouchables to the level of Brahmans, Ambedkar instead proclaimed an alternate religious identity, rather than attempting to claim higher Varna status within Hinduism.

Choosing Buddhism over other religions by Ambedkar has always been an issue of introspection within academic discourses. These arguments are firstly, Lokanatha<sup>ii</sup> in his work ‘Buddhism will make you free’ has argued that since there was “...no caste in Buddhism”<sup>iii</sup>, their attempt to convert to Buddhism was emancipating. He believed that such a conversion would raise their status in society. Ambedkar largely agreed to this argument. Further, Ambedkar also considered that Buddhism unlike Brahmanism was not based on magic and rituals, rather it was based on rationality and ethics.

Secondly, as Eleanor Zelliot has argued, by choosing Buddhism Ambedkar was never trying to debunk other religions. There have been many cases where the Dalits have got themselves converted to Islam, Sikhism and Christianity. Ambedkar believed that any religion which annihilates any form biasness or exclusion is worth being accepted.

Ambedkar was skeptical of congress that it could address the issue of untouchability in India. In fact, on October 11 1939, in the context of a comment on the demand that had been raised to divide India into Hindu India and Muslim India, Ambedkar stated that since the upper caste were not ready to merge the Dalit minority within the larger group, he won't mind merging them with Muslim India. He was thus trying to ironically held congress for the partition of India because he believed that the congress was ignorant to the plights of Dalits which would eventually lead to division of India.

Islam on the other hand was too ready to accept the Dalits within the Islamic fold. It is evident from the fact that on October 1935, Mohammed Irfan, representative of Caliphate Central Committee, called on Ambedkar, assuring him that in Islam there was perfect equality. However, mass conversion to Islam was not taken much seriously by Ambedkar probably because Ambedkar while considering the idea of religion never detached his feeling of Patriotism. He was somewhere apprehended that mass conversion would somewhere factionalize Indian society and would lead to split of the nation.

Ambedkar did consider merging with the Sikh community seriously. Sikhism had an added advantage of being an Indian founded religion so that becoming a Sikh involved no loss of

patriotism.<sup>iv</sup> The militant image of Sikh was as great as that of Muslims, which according to Ambedkar was important for untouchables to free themselves from servility. Further, like Islam Sikh community were too open to accept conversion. The support for conversion to Sikhism also came from Hindu Mahasabha. This is important remark because Hindu Mahasabha considered itself to be the preserver of Hinduism and showing no opposition somewhere reflected its orthodox position of not negotiating with the dalit identity. The Indian leadership was however divided on the issue of conversion to Sikhism, Mahatma Gandhi, C.Rajagoplachari, Pandit Malviya completely rejected such conversion; Gandhi referred to such conversion as ‘barter’<sup>v</sup>. Further, Gandhi never saw conversion as the solution. For him untouchability could be answered only through the moral purification of the Hindu upper caste. However, despite opposition there were over fifty people who were converted at the Sikh Mission Conference held at Amritsar on April 1936, and Ambedkar attended this meeting. However, Ambedkar Sikh plan conversion fizzled later.

However, it is interesting to note here that when it comes to locate the identity among the Dalit converts to any of these religious folds their status was hardly emancipating. Further, the new status acquired by them also distanced them from the existing community to which they belonged. For instance, the Dalits who converted themselves to Muslims acquired the status of Arzal Muslims who were the lowest strata among the Muslim caste. Further, the word Arzal was rooted in the word ‘Rizl’ which meant the useless. Thus the initial conversion to Islam was not emancipating. Even the conversion of Dalits into Christians saw the practice of untouchability towards them, for instance, in south India they were never given the same status as the Syrian Christians. Further they had their separate churches, priest and separate religious spaces.

Thus the question of identity among Dalits was not resolved simply by their decision to convert, since what was also important was that whether this community is accepted by the other community or not. Further, if one locates the identity of the ‘converts to Muslims or Christian’ community within independent India they were marginalized at two levels; firstly at a level where the state failed to recognize the element of untouchability within them as there were no scriptural evidence for the same. Secondly, the Dalit Christian or the Dalit Muslims were also unacceptable among the Dalit Hindus. For instance a Hindu Dalit would refuse to marry her daughter off to a converted Dalit as he was no more considered part of Dalit community, thus the sense of exclusion which came along with the issue of conversion cannot be denied.

Probably, Ambedkar chose to convert to ‘Buddhism’ was his attempt to do away with such exclusion as well. It is interesting to note here that even within Buddhism he chose ‘Navayana’ Buddhism which was different from Theravada, the Mahayana and the Vajrayana. He thus accepted Buddhism and Buddhist teachings as it existed in its pristine form. He thereby adhered to Buddha’s concept of ‘Nibbana’. Ambedkar in his major work ‘Buddha and His Dhamma’, tried to define nibbana as:

- Believe in the happiness of sentient being rather than salvation of ones’ soul.
- Happiness of sentient being in samsara, that is while he is alive.
- Conception of nibbana essentially meant control over the flames of passion through transcendence.

However, there were many ideological complexities associated with accepting Buddhism. Probably that is why in his text ‘The Buddha and His Dhamma’ he mentions “What He accepted”, that is the aspect of navayana Buddhism which he accepted.

It is also argued that Ambedkar chose Buddhist fold because it in some of its most fundamental tenants was anti-thetical to Brahmanism. Gail Omvedt for instance argues that the Buddhist specific ideals of what the ideal king should be like was very different from the Brahmanical texts. Like for instance, the brahmanical version of state and society discusses only the parts of political system whereas the Buddhist version teaches the state relationship with the society. Further, when one looks into the concept of soul and rebirth, Buddhism presented quite a different point of view when placed vis-à-vis the loudbrahminical text. Thus Ambedkar saw coming up of Buddhism as a revolution already set against the dominant brahminical regime. His attempt to conversion to Buddhism can be seen in the light of appropriation of these revolutionary ideas which were inherently embedded in Buddhism.

For Ambedkar, Buddhism was an attempt to bring about social change within society. He did not consider Buddhism simply because its spirituality appealed him, rather within Buddhism he found a rational and psychologically oriented 'Dhamma', which was designed to help humans' life in the world and transform the world free from 'dukha'.<sup>vi</sup> Buddhism infact became synonymous with samanism, i.e. putting forward pragmatic counter-ideas and teachings of non-violence, egalitarian co-existence and rationality against the hegemonic, theistic, ritualistic orthodoxy of Brahmanism. Probably, this is the reason why Buddha is referred to as 'SamanaGotam'. The Buddha was the worldly samana who evolved a middle way between the extremes of material unmindful indulgences advocated by some gross materialist. Buddha, as a compassionate person also engaged with human problems, the main purpose of Buddha's teachings and his rejection of Brahmanic and other teachings was directed towards helping people at large to gain insight in order to achieve liberation from the uncertainties and miseries of human life. Buddha, as Ambedkar perceived, stood for the creation of level playing field or a non hierarchical, exploitation free social world.

Infact it is argued that the samana cult and the brahmanic tradition emerged as two major contending and conflicting forces in Indian society of first millennium BCE. They clashed at several points. Organizationally, Brahmanism had its base in the household brahmanic elite, while samanas had their base in the wandering hermits and medicants drawn from various castes. Brahmanic tradition was passed down through the guru-disciple tradition that at times was loose but was generally identified with the caste hierarchy. It was secretive. The samana groups in contrast were open to all and their philosophers engaged in often fierce open debates.

Sue Hamilton in his work 'Indian Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction', carefully reads the Buddhist texts to understand why Buddha became an implacable critic of brahmanic philosophy and practices. According to him, Buddha was concerned to undermine the Brahmins not because he wished to win a philosophical point but because he saw Brahmins claims to exclusivity and supreme authority as pernicious to people's well-being. To explain this he quotes from Dhammapada where Buddha says 'Don't try to build your happiness on the unhappiness of others; you will be enmeshed in the net of hatred' (Dhammapada, xxi, 2). Further, Hamilton also argues that Buddha rejected the brahmanic reliance on tradition and inherited words of wisdom, and he thus talked about accepting or rejecting an idea in the light of one's own experience. His celebrated phrase *Atta dipo bhava atta saran* (i.e. be your own lamp and take refuge only in your own self) stands as the tenacious testimony to how Buddha undercut the brahmanical believe in transcendental divinity and portrayal of human life as plaything of the gods above.

At the theoretical level, Ambedkar's adherence to Buddhist Dhamma was also a fundamental alternative to Marxism. For Ambedkar, Buddhist Dhamma was an answer to Marxist questions. In his essay 'Buddha or Karl Marx', Ambedkar's central argument remains that despite

his celebration of ideas like 'liberty', 'equality' and 'fraternity' religiosity is something which cannot be escaped. In the essay he says that though Buddha and Karl Marx are separated by some 2500 years it is possible to juxtapose the two ideologies to certain degree. He tries to find common ground between the two, by talking in terms equality or in Marxist language an egalitarian society, socialism (which he compares with Buddhist tenant of nothing is final or notion of ephemerality), limited wants of Buddhism with Marxist concept of self sufficiency, etc.

However, when it came to the question of conversion he chose Buddhism over Marxism, because it is argued that at a philosophical level he believed in the Buddhist tenants answered to the atrocity and inequality prevalent in society. Further, Buddhist principles like foregoing alcohol and private property somewhere also attracted Ambedkar as he saw (like Marxism) as they being the root to all problems in modern society. Somewhere, one can understand Ambedkar's acceptance to Buddhism as his believe in a particular religious space which offered sanctity to his secular thoughts as well.

### Ambedkar on caste identity:

Ambedkar in his major work 'Annihilation of Caste' written in 1936 has systematically problematised the 'chaturvarnya' and the Hindu caste structure at large. He begins his argument by saying that the defenders of caste system has appreciated caste for it brings about 'division of labour', he however goes beyond this argument stating that caste system is not 'merely division of labour, but division of labourers'<sup>vii</sup>. He further argues that not only is this division of labourers hierarchised but this hierarchy is not based on ones 'natural aptitude'<sup>viii</sup>. He contrast this parochial caste system with the modern industrial society and argues that the modern industry is never static and even an individual is free to change his occupation based on his choice. Caste system marks a strong contrast owing to the fact that it does away with the human freedom to make choice.

He further in the text has presented how caste system and the racial problems are two different problems. He says '...to hold the distinction of castes are really the distinction of races is a gross perversion of facts'<sup>ix</sup>. To prove this point he talks of the Brahmin of Punjab and Chamar of Punjab, their exists stark absence of racial difference between the two. Thus to him '...Caste system is the social division of people of the same race'<sup>x</sup>. He further substantiates it by saying that caste system has nothing to do with the basic principles of eugenics as stated by scientists. He argues that such an argument comes from the arrogant and perverse section of Hindus who through such argument intends to create dominant hegemonic superiority. He also elaborates his argument by drawing upon an analogy from Hindu myth where the shudras were the defeated warriors on whom the Brahmins rejected to perform the upanayan ceremony. Thus what existed within the Hindu fold initially were only the three varana Brahmin, kshtriya and vishayas; the category of 'shudras' was construed eventually<sup>xi</sup>.

Ambedkar argues that Hindu society is a myth and there 'did not exist any such Sanskrit word prior to the Mohammedan invasion. Further Hindu society was never an integrative society per se because the caste system all forms of common activity which prevented any form of cultural diffusion within society. He thus charges the Hindus with the 'anti-social spirit'<sup>xii</sup>, which is an inherent feature of Hindu caste-system. Thus he says 'the Hindus, therefore are not merely an assortment of castes they are so many warring groups each living for itself and for its selfish ideals'<sup>xiii</sup>.

He thus towards the conclusion critics' Hindu ideology on four grounds:

1. Hindu religion claims itself to be moral and it often claims this proclamation is made with an aura of superiority. However, for Ambedkar such claim of morality is fallacious for the reason such morality fails to exhibit itself in terms of 'survival values'<sup>xiv</sup>.
2. Hindu religion posits a closed social structure, which in turn does not allow any form of social change.
3. Hindu religion draws its ideals from past. It is a futile imitation of the past. The past understanding fails to comprehend the present.
4. Hindu concept of 'Sanatan' is misnomer. It fails to recognise a changing society with constant revolution of old values.

On The Way To Goregaon: (a way of understanding caste oppression through the narrative of ambedkar's writing)

The story is a brief journey of Ambedkar with his family to Goregaon, where his father used to work as a government employee, when he was just nine years old. The story catches attention not for the reason that it weaves around some extraordinary plot, rather the brief sojourn of Ambedkar is the narrative of the complicated problem of untouchability amidst the mundane events of life. Even though the family is well dressed and is laden with all reasonable moral and etiquettes, they are denied with cart ride owing to the fact that they are 'untouchables' and riding with them would pollute them. The notion of 'purity' and 'pollution' stands quite ironical for the reason that it is not the external dirt which is polluting, rather what pollutes is the internalised nuance that 'Mahars are polluting'. Further, Ambedkar in the story reveals that despite having abundance of food they remain hungry because there is no access to water. Clearly, what Ambedkar has tried to argue through these events is that mere class mobilisation was not an answer to the problems of untouchability as it was firmly grounded within the 'Hindu social order'.

An interesting dimension through which the narrative of Ambedkar's journey could be understood is through the paradigm of humiliation. Humiliation is not disgust. Disgust is an emotion which brings out a sense of repulsion. Disgust requires an object of expression. It is associated with filthy and obnoxious objects. Humiliation on the other hand is basically political. Disgust is just one of the condition for humiliation and at times not even essential condition. Humiliation is rather a sense of making the other a worthless being by withering away his self-respect. In the narrative of Ambedkar we find that he and his family are equipped with '...bright bejewelled caps, new shoes, new silk bordered Dhotis'<sup>xv</sup> which stands in stark contrast to any form of 'disgusting' element, still they are subject to humiliation. The only water which they find permissible to drink is the one with 'mud, urine and excreta'<sup>xvi</sup> dissolved. Thus the humiliation imposed on them is not by the virtue of they being 'disgusting' per se, it rather exists because the Hindu social structure denies them of self-respect and thus reduces them to objects of humiliation by the 'touchable' others.

Ambedkar also talks about the exclusion which he faced even within the secular institution like the school. He says how his allocation of seat within the classroom was kept with a distance with the other touchable classmates. For drinking water he required permission of peon as it was defiling for him as an 'untouchable' to touch the source of water, if there was no peon outside he often had to go thirsty. The washerman would reject washing his clothes; the barber would refuse any service to him. Thus the Hindu social structure rendered them in complete isolation from the mainstream society.

A critical narration of this story is significant since it highlights the plights of the lower caste and Dalits with a reflexive tone. Ambedkar's work becomes further significant owing to the

fact that that caste structure and its practices were so much internalized and naturalized that at times it was difficult to state the problems of caste structure. A narration like this thus becomes a space to vent out atrocities which somewhere gets lost in everyday practices and mundane activities of life-events. The story highlights the background reality of what made Ambedkar leave the fold of Hinduism completely and accept Buddhism as the worldview of his religious identity.

### Conversion and identity:

Though Ambedkar had declared long before in yeola conference of 1936 that he would '...not die a Hindu', the conversion came much later in 1956, probably because he looked into question of conversion with deep introspection. In one of his work 'Conversion as emancipation'; he wrote "...conversion is not a child's play. It is not a subject of entertainment. It deals with how to make man's life successful. Just as a boatman has to make necessary preparations before he starts on a voyage, so also we have to make such preparations"<sup>xvii</sup>.

There were several significant activities that took place prior to 1956 conversion. Ambedkar visited several Buddhist monasteries. In around 1954, the mahar community dedicated the temple of Cokhamela to him. Cokhamela, a 14<sup>th</sup> century Dalit sant, was associated with the widespread Bhakti tradition in western India and particularly Maharashtra. He was a vakarisant whose family followed the same work as that of the mahars. The association with Bhakti tradition was significant because as Gail Omvedt would argue, that the Bhakti movement showed clear conflict with brahanism and caste hierarchy. Ambedkar's association with cokhamela temple was somewhere a celebration of this aspect of Bhakti tradition. However, he also argues that there were substantial difference in the ethical behavior and principle of the two traditions.

It was on 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> October 1956 that the actual conversion began. After holding the ceremony at Sarnath, and then at Bombay, Ambedkar decided on Nagpur, informing the leaders of his decision for conversion almost five weeks before the actual ceremony. The oldest Bhikhu in India, MahasthiveerChandramani came to Nagpur to give *diksha* and then preside over the conversion ceremony. More than 60000 mahar people got themselves converted. Ambedkar died on December 16<sup>th</sup>, 1956 within two months of the Nagpur conversion. His cremation ceremony in Bombay was the occasion of anther conversion, administered to lakhs of people by the bhikkuanandkausalyayan after the largest funeral procession Bombay had ever seen. The streets were filled with the chantings of *BuddhamSaranamGacchami* i.e. I take refuge in Buddha. On 16<sup>th</sup> December crowds gathered at dikhsa ground in Nagpur for the conversion rites in Nasik and Bombay. Conversion ceremonies were held across the face of Maharashtra in next two months. Of the entire converts 80% belonged to the mahar community. This somewhere reflects that more than religious emancipation conversion was an attempt particularly by the mahar community to gain a religious identity which as the untouchables Hindus they were deniedof.

With the Dharmashikhaof 1956, a new era of Buddhism in India began, as masses of Dalits in Maharashtra and north India affirmed a new commitment. Yet for decades this remained stagnant, limited to Dalits, and restricted as social force because of their poverty, lack of education and material backwardness. Even their population of some millions in context of India's near-billion population seemed insignificant.

From the 1970s, however, a new anti-caste movement began (like the Dalit-panther movement), which soon gathered force and became a mass movement by 1980s and brought the campaign against Brahmanism on to a wider Indian stage. This in turn eventually led to a renewed interest in Buddhism among wider section of Indians-primarily among Dalits in India, but it also

included other backward classes (O.B.C), non-Brahmins, and also in some areas upper caste intellectuals. By the beginning of new millennium, when Dalits took their campaign against casteism to a world arena and tried to focus world attention at the world conference against racism held in August-September 2001 at Durban. The world has recently seen new wave of conversion to Buddhism which involves seekers from North America, Europe. Buddhism thus has emerged out as the religion of emancipation across the globe, and Ambedkar rightfully understood this essence of Buddhism much prior to the emergence of global discourse on Buddhism as the source of identity and emancipative force.

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- <sup>i</sup> . Varshney, Ashutosh, "Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life", p.11.
  - <sup>ii</sup> . An Italian Buddhist monk who published his work in Ceylon and dedicated his work to depressed classes of India.
  - <sup>iii</sup> . Zelliott, Eleanor, 'Ambedkar's Conversion', p.17.
  - <sup>iv</sup> . *ibid*, p.17.
  - <sup>v</sup> . *The Depressed Classes*, p.153.
  - <sup>vi</sup> . Omvedt, Gail, *Buddhism in India*, p.3.
  - <sup>vii</sup> . Ambedkar, B.R., "Annihilation of Caste", P.47.
  - <sup>viii</sup> . *ibid*, p.47.
  - <sup>ix</sup> . *ibid*, p. 49.
  - <sup>x</sup> . *ibid*, p. 51.
  - <sup>xi</sup> . Talks about it in six points in his essay 'Who were the Shudras', p.388 in "The essential writings of B.R.Ambedkar.
  - <sup>xii</sup> . *ibid*, p. 55.
  - <sup>xiii</sup> . *ibid*, p. 56.
  - <sup>xiv</sup> . *ibid*, p. 101.
  - <sup>xv</sup> . Ambedkar, B.R., 'On way to Goregaon', p. 48 in the "The essential writings of B.R.Ambedkar".
  - <sup>xvi</sup> . *ibid*, p.49.
  - <sup>xvii</sup> . Ambedkar, B.R, "Conversion as Emancipation", essay 'What way emancipation', 1936, p.8.

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