



RESPONSE TO DR. BABASAHEB AMBEDKAR'S DECLARATION OF CONVERSION

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ABSTRACT:

Believing that the condition of the untouchables would not improve without abandoning Hinduism, which supported untouchability, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar announced conversion in 1935. A study of the positive and negative response received by him mainly from the Dalit class and the rebuttal made by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, has been presented in this research article.

KEY WORDS: Untouchables, Buddhism, Pune, P.N. Rajbhoj, Poona Pact, R. R. Bhole.

INTRODUCTION :

From 1920 AD Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar made tireless efforts to reform the Hindu society. But still the mentality of the touchable society towards the untouchables has not changed. Dr. Ambedkar would have liked to consider himself and his untouchable community as 'Protestant Hindus'. But he decided to quit Hinduism only after he was convinced that the touchable society would never treat the untouchables as equals. He made the historic announcement of conversion at the Bombay Provincial Untouchables Conference on 13 October 1935 at Yewla.

Babasaheb's announcement of conversion evoked mixed reactions in the touchable and untouchable communities. Some tried to discourage the untouchables from converting through negative reactions. Babasaheb dismissed their objections in a scholarly manner. The study of this religious-ideological conflict is presented in this research article.

OBJECTIVES:

1. Presenting the response of mainly Dalits to Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's declaration of conversion.
2. Babasaheb's rebuttal to the objections raised by the touchable and untouchable leaders to the declaration of conversion.
3. To present the effect of this debate on actual conversion.

METHOD :

The study will be presented in a narrative or expository manner by adopting the Reference Method of historical research.

Response Of The Touchable :

Dr. Ambedkar's announcement of conversion was a big shock to Hindus. A letter was sent to Dr. Ambedkar by N. C. Kelkar, L. B.Bhopatkar, Chiplunkar Shastri and S. M. Mate of Pune, assuring that

sensitive Hindus would now show understanding, appealing to Ambedkar's spirit and earnestly requesting that Ambedkar refrain from announcing conversion. Congress President Dr Rajendra Prasad was saddened by the conversion resolution. "We can understand the anger behind that resolution, but it is unfortunate that something should be done that will make the work of reformers difficult," he said.¹

Thus, some upper caste Hindu leaders hoped for a change in Hindu society, while others feared that Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's decision to convert would stunt the progress of the untouchables movement. Leaders like V. D. Savarkar expressed the opinion that the decision of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's conversion would not make any difference to Hinduism.

Response of the Untouchables:

However, this announcement created a huge amount of awareness among the untouchable community in India. Meetings and conferences were held to support the declaration of conversion. The Akhil Maharashtrian Untouchable Youth Conference was held on 11-12 January 1936 at Pune in the grand grounds of the Ahilya Ashram. Rao Bahadur N. Shivraj was present as the president of this conference and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was present as the chief guest. R. R. Bhole was the welcome president of this conference. Welcome President R. R. Bhole said in his speech, "Despite suffering all atrocities, we have remained Hindus for centuries. We have also served the motherland. But we have been beaten on the contrary. Now it is not possible for us to remain like clay dolls anymore. We want to taste the air of freedom. We do not want to fight with Hinduism, we only have a complaint against casteism. The language of change of heart is enough now."² Thus Bhole rejected the argument of a change of heart by touchable Hindu leaders.

Comment by P. N. Rajbhoj:

The announcement of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's conversion to religion had a strong impact everywhere else. P. N. Rajbhoj, an untouchable leader from Pune, termed Babasaheb's announcement as a 'political stunt'. His opinion in this regard is given as follows in the issue of Times dated March 4, 1936. - "From my visits to several villages in Nasik district, I'm satisfied that with the exception of some Mahar supporters of Dr. Ambedkar, the majority of Harijans are against the move for conversion to another religion. I think that this propaganda is nothing short of a political stunt," declared Mr. P. N. Rajbhoj, the Poona Harijan leader, on his return from a tour of the villages in Nasik, in answer to an urgent summons by the Harijan headquarters at Poona. Harijans, he had found on his tour, preferred to remain within the Hindu fold rather than forsake it, whatever the inducements offered by other religions. He was convinced that though the lot of Harijans was improving gradually, the rate of improvement was not as it should be."³

Condemnation in Lucknow conference :

In the All India Depressed Classes Conference held at Lucknow on April 14-15, 1936 under the chairmanship of Babu Jagjivan Ram, a resolution was passed condemning Babasaheb Ambedkar's conversion, as reported in the Times dated April 22, 1936. The sixth session of All India Depressed Classes Conference was held at Lucknow on April 14th and April 15th, under the presidentship of Babu Jagjivan Ram of Behar.

Mr. Gandhi, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, Mr. Rajendra Prasad, Seth Jammalal Bajaj and other leaders attended the conference. Mr. P. N. Rajbhoj of Poona and Mr. H. J. Khandekar of Nagpur and other Harijan leaders from different parts of the country attended the conference. The conference unanimously "condemned" Dr. Ambedkar's "Stunt" of leaving the Hindu Dharma and passed several other resolutions.The conference ended with shouts of "Long live Hindu dharma."⁴

Controversy Over Conversion And Political Rights Of Untouchables :

A major contentious issue was whether the untouchables would continue to enjoy the political rights granted to them under the 1935 Act if they converted. Babasaheb had considered this question from all sides before announcing the conversion. Touchable and untouchables used to raise this

question from time to time through meetings and newspapers. At that time, Babasaheb used to express his opinion that even if the untouchables converted, they would get to enjoy the political rights that they got as untouchables even after conversion. In this regard, he expressed his opinion as follows in the foreword of Janata's July 25 and August 1, 1936 issue. "Realizing that the old methods of bringing down the untouchables have become inadequate, the Hindus have invented a new way of confronting and exterminating the untouchables. Hindus have taunted the untouchables that if they convert, they will lose the political rights they got under the new constitution.This clearly means that if the untouchables are to enjoy the political rights granted in the new political constitution, they must remain Hindus.For this ploy to succeed, there must first be some definite legal definition of who is to be called a Hindu. But no one has given a general definition of the word Hindu so far and no attempt has been made to put it in any law. Hinduism is so difficult to define that we read that 'one who is not a follower of any religion is a follower of Hinduism' formulated by an expert. Even the Hindu Mahasabha itself has defined the word 'Hindu' as a Hindu who follows any religion originated in India and the word Hindu includes Sanatani, Arya Samaj, Jain, Sikh, Buddhist and Brahmo etc. Where it is uncertain who is a Hindu and who is not, the attempt to lock the untouchables into the Hindu dilemma will be futile."⁵

Conversion and the rights conferred by the Poona Pact :

Bombay Chronicle dated 15th August 1936 reported that P. N. Rajbhoj said that there were no benefits of the Pune Pact for those who came out of Hinduism, while opposing Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's conversion decision. "The Poona Pact does not make any provision for converts from Hinduism, and even if some of the Harijan community embraced Sikhism or any other religion in a body, it is not within the power of the Poona Pact signatories to retain for those converts any of the advantages secured under it.Dr. Ambedkar never once raised the question of conversion at the time of the Pact.Even in Maharashtra only the Mahars favoured such a view, but the Chamars were solidly opposed to any conversion. There was no support to the idea in other provinces and he was surprised how the Hindu leaders were inveigled into it."⁶

Babasaheb's thoughts on conversion :

Babasaheb remained firm on the decision of conversion even when the decision or announcement of conversion was heavily criticized. Babasaheb wanted conversion only for worldly, social and philosophical reasons. He was of the opinion that one has to prepare for conversion. After some 21 years of his declaration of conversion, he converted to Buddhism only after being convinced that Buddhism was scientifically sound. He said that, "I regard the Buddha's Dhamma to be the best. No religion can be compared to it. If the modern man who knows science must have a religion, the only religion he can have is the religion of Buddha."⁷

He wrote 'The Buddha and his Dhamma' in very simple, clear and logical language for his followers. Regarding his scriptures, Dr. Ambedkar says "I would like to make it clear that I claim no originality for the book. It is a compilation and assembly plant"⁸ But these thoughts should be accepted only as modesty. Although Buddhist philosophy is contained in many texts, what is important is how Babasaheb perceived it. In a sense it is an independent commentary. Now it has been translated into many languages and it has got a place in the world scriptures.⁹

Later Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar accepted Buddhism in Nagpur along with millions of his untouchable brothers on 14th October 1956. On this historic occasion, hundreds of untouchables from Pune were also present to take initiation into Buddhist Dhamma. Advocate Shankarao Kharat, Organizing Secretary, Maharashtra Pradesh Scheduled Caste Federation, V. R.Ranpise and other prominent activists were also there.¹⁰

A detailed account of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's Buddhist Dhammadiksha ceremony is given in the October 15, 1956 issue of the Indian Express. It is as follows – "Among those who embraced Buddhism today were Dr.M.B.Niyogi, Former Chief Justice of Nagpur High Court, Mr.R. Khobragade, Gen. Secretary of the S.C.F., Mr.Bhaurao Gaikwad, President of Maharashtra S.C.F., Ms.Shantabai Dani, Gen. Secretary of Maharashtra S.C.F., Mr.B.C.Kamble, M.L.A. of Bombay, Mr.G.T. Parmar, President of the

Gujrat S.C.F., Mr.S.J.Fulzele, Deputy Mayor of Nagpur and Mr.Haridas Awole, newly elected member of the Bombay Legislative Council."¹¹

Although Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and his followers broke away from Hinduism and embraced Buddhism, it was not a crusade against Hinduism. This was explained in the foreword of the Indian Express dated 16 October 1956, with an opinion piece by Dr. M. B. Niyogi. He said, "But whether old or new, crusades against Hindus are not part of Buddhism."¹²

Conversion continues to be criticized by Dalit leaders like P. N.Rajbhoj. He said that problems of the depressed classes in India were mainly social and economic and conversion to other religions was no solution.¹³

After conversion a social, religious, educational and economic revolution took place among the Dhammadikshit Dalits. But among the Dalits, who did not accept Buddhism and those who stuck to Hinduism, there was no ideological transformation. As a result, they could not get the energy for social progress and remained socially backward. Dalits, tribals and other backward classes are realizing this. Therefore, Dalits, tribals and other backward classes not only in Maharashtra but also in many other states of India organized programs to accept Buddhism in major cities of their respective states on the occasion of the Golden Year of Dhammadiksha in October 2006.¹⁴

As a part of it, on 2nd October 2006 Prof. Laxman Mane along with thousands of his brothers embraced Buddhism in Nagpur and on 27th May 2007 lakhs of Nomads took Buddhist Dhammadiksha at the Race Course ground in Mumbai. Prof. Laxman Mane, the leader of Nomadic Society, while explaining his position in this regard, says, "The master never allows the slave to rebel. A slave wants to rebel on his own. Acceptance of our Dhamma is like a small rebellion. Now the previous rebels should accommodate these rebels. Protect them in every way."¹⁵

CONCLUSION :

Mainly leaders of untouchables like P. N. Rajbhoj, Babu Jagjivanram opposed Babasaheb's decision to convert. However, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar gave logical answers to the questions raised by them. Yet a large section of the untouchable community remained indifferent to the conversion movement at that time. However, seeing the educational, social and religious progress of those who took Buddhist Dhamma initiation with Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, the people of Untouchables, Adivasi and OBC communities are realizing the importance of conversion.

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