

## CHAPTER VIII

### The Neo-Buddhist Movement

#### Background

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's journey to Buddhism spreads over a span of about 40 years . At the age of 16 Keluskar gave him a copy of biography of Gautam Buddha when he successfully completed high school in 1908. The book made a deep impression on Ambedkar. However , it lay dormant for many years. However it was revived on the eve of the Yeola Conference convened by the leaders of the Depressed Classes in 1935. The conference met at Yeola on October 13 and was attended by about 10,000 Untouchables of all shades of opinion. In a convincing speech lasting over an hour and a half, Ambedkar recounted the plight of the Depressed Classes in all spheres, economic, social, educational and political and pointed out the immense sacrifices made by them to secure the barest human rights. He said that it gave him a very painful realisation that the time and money spent on efforts made to achieve those objectives had proved utterly fruitless. He, therefore , expressed his opinion that the time for making a final decision to settle the matter had arrived. He, then, with a rise in his voice exhorted them to sever their connection with Hinduism and seek solace and self - respect in another religion. However, he warned them to be very careful in choosing the new faith and to see that equality of treatment , status and opportunity was guaranteed to them unreservedly. As to his own personal decision in the matter, Ambedkar said that unfortunately for him he was born a Hindu Untouchable. It was beyond his power to prevent this , but he declared that it was within his power to refuse to live under ignoble and humiliating condition. "I solemnly assure you that I will not die a Hindu," he thundered.<sup>1</sup>

Even after his announcement of his resolve to abandon Hinduism, Ambedkar did not opt right away in favour of Buddhism. Even in the Presidential address that he had prepared for the

Lahore Conference convened by the *Jat-Pat Todak Mandal*, he only repeated his resolve to leave Hinduism but gave no indication of the faith which he wished to embrace. Following the announcement, representatives of different faith publicly or privately invited Ambedkar to embrace their faith. The obvious choices before Ambedkar were Sikhism, Christianity and Islam. Of these, it would appear that Islam was not considered seriously at any stage. One important reason for this could have been that by choosing Islam in the charged atmosphere of Hindu-Muslim communal tension, Ambedkar would have invited even greater hostility from the Hindus towards himself and his followers. This is only conjecture and there is no specific comment by Ambedkar to suggest this. When in 1935, there were Muslim as well as Sikh observers present at the meeting. As regards Islam and Christianity, Ambedkar seems to have had the feeling that both these religions practised caste system of their own. With regard to Christianity he also had the complaint that the church had not been able to further the interest of its Depressed Class converts in substantial manner.<sup>2</sup>

Of the three — Sikhism, Christianity and Islam — only Sikhism was seriously considered for adoption. Ambedkar sent his son and nephew to the Golden Temple in Amritsar. He also sent another group of thirteen young men to study Sikhism. He had discussion with Dr. Moonje of the Hindu Mahasabha on the choice of Sikhism.<sup>3</sup> But he seems to have given up the idea of opting for Sikhism, sometime after his return from London. Keer mentions this in his biography of Ambedkar (Keer, 1962) but gives not date or year.<sup>4</sup> It would appear though this must have been after one year of his visits to London in the mid-1930s.<sup>5</sup>

The formal declaration of the decision to embrace Buddhism came in May 1950 and in the same year he gave a talk at the Young Buddhists Conference in Colombo on the rise and fall of Buddhism. Obviously the decision could not have been sudden, and one would assume that he had been reading on Buddhism for at least a few years. The factor that would have weighed against the choice of Buddhism must have been primarily that Buddhism had very little following left in India, though it was the land of its birth. Conversion to Buddhism would mean that it would get identified as the religion of the erstwhile Untouchables and, to that extent, would

reinforce their social isolation, for there is no doubt that Ambedkar was not thinking of conversion only for himself. He was conceiving of it as an act in which a substantial number of his followers would join him. The choice of Buddhism would mean some marginal gain that might have resulted from increasing the relative size of one of the existing minorities. At the same time, Ambedkar was equally certain that the adoption of Buddhism as their religion was likely to meet with the least opposition from the Hindu minority.<sup>6</sup>

On 29 September 1950 in a speech at Buddhist temple in Worli, Ambedkar made his first open plea to his people to embrace Buddhism as a way out of their sufferings and declared that he would devote the rest of his life to the revival and spread of Buddhism.<sup>7</sup> Ambedkar made this pledge in 1935 in a non-descriptive sugar town called Yeola. Yet he would give no sign that Buddhism was to be his refuge until the early fifties. His formal conversion came at the end of 1956. Why did he wait so long?

In the 30 years upto 1945 he had bitter experience of caste Hindus, and he tried his utmost to have separate electorates— an attempt to isolate Scheduled Castes completely from the Hindus. In 1945 he attended a Buddhist Conference. On 20<sup>th</sup> June 1946, on behalf of Peoples' Education Society, he started one College and named it Siddharth College. In 1948, he wrote a forward to — P. L. Narasu's book, *The Essence of Buddhism*. In 1950, he took part in the first Modern Buddhist procession in Delhi. In December 1954, he took part in the Third World Federation of Buddhists. It is said that there he made up his mind to embrace Buddhism. Ambedkar was inclined towards Buddhism openly from May, 1950. On May 24, 1956 he declared on the day of Buddha Jayanti Celebration at Nare Park in Bombay that he would embrace Buddhism in October, 1956. On September, 23, 1956, he issued a press note announcing that his conversion to Buddhism would take place at Nagpur on the *Dassara day*, October 14, 1956 between 9 and 11 a.m. He himself preferred Nagpur which was a historic town where the Buddhist Nagas flourished in ancient times.<sup>8</sup>

Ambedka's detractors have always maintained that the Yeola declaration was nothing more than a shock tactic characteristic of his approach at the time, his conversion no more than

a stunt, the last frantic gesture of a failed politician still looking for the lime-light. His own followers naturally see things differently. Some explained that his political, social and educational work left him no time to devote to the question of conversion. Others pointed out to his posthumously published work, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, suggesting that he was reluctant to launch a mass conversion movement among poor, uneducated folk until he had produced at least one simple book with which to guide them. Yet others declared that the question of conversion was so important to him that he spent those fifteen to twenty years making a conscientious study of the options before him. This, to be fair, was the reason he gave himself.<sup>9</sup> Besides, the Untouchables specially the Mahars had to be educated in the conversion process. Failing this, Ambedkar had been a solitary figure divorced from his own people namely the Untouchables. And this involved sometime. In order to have a change of mind for the Untouchables some time was badly needed. Ambedkar gave this time to the Untouchable masses. It has already been noted earlier that the conversion process was collective as well as individualistic. So far as he was concerned, there was no trouble since he had been already educated in the conversion process. But the Untouchable masses needed time to accept the change of faith from Hinduism to Buddhism. And this also influenced his decision to put off the conversion to some future date.

Ambedkar announced his decision in 1935 to leave Hinduism, but at that time Buddhism was not seen as a viable alternative for the Mahars. Ambedkar was aware of the increased intellectual interest in Buddhism. He himself had received as an examination prize in 1907 a biography of the Buddha in Marathi from its author, a Bombay school teacher. He had been in correspondence with V.R. Shinde, a social reformer who was interested in Buddhism, and who had founded a wide network of schools and hostels for the Untouchables in the 1920. Moreover, Ambedkar named his new home in Bombay, built in 1934, Raj Griha, after the Bihar city of the ancient Buddhist Kings. But in spite of all this, when he announced that he would not die a Hindu in 1935, he was not yet ready to commit himself and his followers to Buddhism.

Ambedkar's personal conversion announcement in 1935 was followed in 1936 by a Mahar conference in Bombay and the Conference, after an address by him, declared its intention for

Converting to another religion. Portions of Ambedkar's impassioned plea for conversion form a sort of litany, which in the printed version is lifted out and placed in a poetry format as follows:-

‘Religion is for man ; man is not for religion (and continues: )

If you want to gain self-respect, change your religion.

If you want to create a co-operating society , change your religion .

If you want power, change your religion.

If you want equality , change your religion.

If you want independence, change your religion.

If you want to make the world in which you live, change your religion.’<sup>10</sup>

It may be noted in this connection that there had been a gap of 20 years before Ambedkar's final conversion to Buddhism took place after the great conversion announcement of 1935-36. For the first few years he flirted with Islam, Sikhism and Christianity in an attempt to combine a personal need for self-respect with an astute political move to allow the Untouchable more political power. Ambedkar personally felt Islam and Christianity to be ‘foreign religions’. And his threatened conversion particularly to Islam seems to have been more in the nature of a weapon to force recognition of the Untouchable's needs from the Hindus than a genuine interest. Sikhism was an Indian Religion and Ambedkar seriously considered this , but as a political expedient it was impractical . The appointment of Ambedkar in 1942 as a Labour member of Viceroy's Executive Council, the highest position in the government to which any Untouchable had ever risen , and his subsequent place in the Constituent Assembly and in Nehru's first cabinet in independent India, gave such active rein to his political ability that the religious question, except for his own personal interest , was left in abeyance.<sup>11</sup>

During the time of Ambedkar's activities on the national scene, his personal interest in Buddhism increased. His College established in 1946 was named Siddharth, the personal name of the Buddha and a second college founded in 1951 was given the name of Milind after the Greek king converted to Buddhism . In 1948 Ambedkar published P.Lakshmi Narasu's *Essence of Buddhism* adding his own introduction . In the same year he also published his own studies,

*The Untouchable*, which theorises that Untouchables had been Buddhist pushed aside from society when they fiercely clung to their religion, while there was a resurgence of *Brahmanical* Hinduism. In 1950 he visited Ceylon (Srilanka) and in the same year began his own compilation of Buddhist scriptures, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, published in 1957. This contains his interpretation of Buddhism — rational, moral, ethical and egalitarian, with little attention to contemplation and complete eradication of any mystical or magical elements.<sup>12</sup>

However, the actual conversion ceremony in relation to Buddhism was held in 1956. By this time Ambedkar was an old man in Indian terms, and so ill that he died only two months later. He took *Diksha* from the oldest Buddhist monk in India before a large audience in Nagpur and set in motion the conversion process that brought over three million Indians into the Buddhist fold in the next few years. Most of the converts are former Mahars of Maharashtra, but small groups of new Buddhists exist in other states.<sup>13</sup>

### The Conversion Ceremony

On September 23, 1956, Dr. Ambedkar issued a press note announcing that his conversion to Buddhism would take place at Nagpur on the *Dassara* day, October 14, 1956, between 9 and 11 a.m. He invited the Rev. Bhikshu Chandramani of Kushinara, Gorakhpur District, to Nagpur, to initiate him into Buddhism on October 14. He added: "It is our great wish, he added, that you should officiate at the ceremony. You being the oldest monk in India we think it would be appropriate to have the ceremony performed by you." He further added that he would send someone to bring him from Kushinara to Nagpur. Ambedkar wrote to D. Valisinha expressing his desire that the 'Mahabodhy Society of India' should participate in the function. He informed him that he had no idea of exactly what ritual there was. However, he had himself framed an important formula of a series of vows to be administered at the time of *Dharma Diksha Ceremony* either by a *Bhikshu* or some Buddhist lay man. He pressed him to attend the ceremony. Again he wrote to Valisinha on October 5 saying that in case of some difference between Valisinha and himself over the initiation ceremony, he would resolve them if he came a little earlier to Nagpur. At the time the '*Mahabodhy*', the famous Buddhist Journal was very much excited with joy and

observed thus: “When on the coming *Vijaya Dashmi* day the lion-hearted leader and his followers made that momentous steps forward, a three fold shout of ‘Sadhu !!!’ will surely rise from every part of the Buddhist world.”

Ambedkar with his wife and Rattu his private secretary left Delhi by air on the morning of October 11 and reached Nagpur at noon. Arrangements were made for their stay in Nagpur at Sham Hotel. Vast throngs of people wanted to touch the feet of their saviour. Meanwhile thousand of men, women and children of the Depressed Classes specially the Mahars had been hourly pouring into Nagpur from the Marathi - speaking areas of Central Provinces and Berar and Bombay by trains and in buses : poor people selling their trinkles for the transport and for white sarees and white shirts, the dress prescribed by the leader. Thousands who could not find easy transport trekked hundred of miles shouting slogans ‘*Bhagwan Buddha ki jay, Babasaheb ki jay*’ : They were accomodated in school houses. The whole atmosphere was surcharged with Buddhist piousness. Nagpur sanctified in the olden times by the residence of Nagarjun, the great scholar leader of Buddhism, became transformed then into a holy place of great significance — historically , cultural and religious.

An expansive open ground of 14 acres near Vaccine Institute at Shradhanand Peth was turned into an enclosure. All approaches and streets leading to the place were decorated with bunting on the evening of October 13. He told newsman that his Buddhism would cling to tenets of the faith as preached by Lord Buddha himself, without involving his people in differences arising on account of *Hinajana* and *Mahajana*. His Buddhism would be a sort of Neo-Buddhism or *Navayan*. When asked why he was embracing Buddhism, he said angrily “Why cannot you ask this question to yourself and to your forefathers as to why I am getting out of the Hindu fold and embracing Buddhism?” He asked newsman why they wanted his men to remain Harijan to enjoy only such ‘benefit’ as those of reservations. He asked them whether the Brahmins were prepared to be Untouchables to enjoy these privileges. He said that they were making efforts to reach manhood. He declared that once he had to tell Gandhi that though he differed from him on the issue of untouchability he would choose the least harmful way for the country. In his own

words : “I will choose only the least harmful way for the country. And that is the greatest benefit I am conferring on the country by embracing Buddhism ; for Buddhism is a part and parcel of Bharatiya culture. I have taken care that my conversion will not harm the tradition of the culture and history of this land.”

On the morning of October 14, 1956 Ambedkar woke up early . He asked Rattu to arrange for a hot bath and then to make sure that arrangements at pandal had been made perfect. Since early morning a sea of humanity had been flowing towards the *Diksha bhoomi*. The sweepers had swept the street leading to it at day - break as they deemed it their fortune to sweep a street along which their saviour was to pass. The skies were filled with the resounding ‘Joys’ to the Buddha and Bahasaheb. Dressed in silk white *dhoti* and white coat, Ambedkar left the hotel at 8.30 in the morning in a car with Rattu and his wife Mrs. Sabita Ambedkar, who had also put on a white *saree*. The huge crowds enthusiastically cheered their saviour as he reached the Pandal and was taken up on the dais. He stood on the dais with a staff in one hand and the other hand on Rattu’s shoulder. There was thunderous applause. It was a quarter passed nine in the morning. Cameramen were busy taking photographs; newsmen writing reports. On the dais there stood on a table a bronze statuette of the Buddha flanked by two statues tigers and incense burning before it. Sitting on the dais were D.Valisinha, Ven. M. Sanghratna Thera, Ven. H. Sadda Tissa Thera and Ven. Pannanand Thera.

The initiation of ceremony started with a Marathi song sung by a lady in praise of Ambedkar. The vast gathering stood up and observed silence for a minute in memory of the death anniversary of Ambedkar’s father. Thus the actual ceremony began. Scores of photographers rushed towards the dais. The vast humanity of over three lakhs of men and women from all parts of the state watched the ceremony eagerly as the eighty - three year - old Mahasthaveer Chandramani of Kushinara and his four saffron - robed *Bhikshus* administered in Pali to Ambedkar and his wife, who were both bowing before the image of Buddha, the three *Saranas* under Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Sangh* and *Panchsheel* of five precepts of abstention from killing, stealing, telling lies, wrongful sex life, and drink. They repeated the Pali *mantras* in Marathi. And then they

bowed down thrice with clasped hands before the Buddha statuette and made offerings of white lotuses before it. With this, Ambedkar's entry into the Buddhist fold was announced, and the vast concourse gave full - throated cries of '*Babasaheb Ambedkar ki jay.*' The whole ceremony was filmed. It was now a quarter to ten in the morning.

Ambedkar was garlanded by his followers after his conversion. D. Valisinha presented Ambedkar and Mrs. Sabita Ambedkar with an image of lord Buddha. Thereafter, Ambedkar declared : "By discarding my ancient religion which stood for inequality and oppression today I am reborn. I have no faith in the philosophy of incarnation ; and it is wrong and mischievous to say that Buddha was an incarnation of Vishnu . I am no more a devotee of any Hindu god or goddess. I will not perform *Shraddha*. I will strictly follow the eight fold path of Buddha. Buddhism is a true religion and I will lead a life guided by the three principles of knowledge, right path and compassion." <sup>14</sup>

Ambedkar took the following Buddhist oaths :<sup>15</sup>

1. I will not regard *Brahma* , *Vishnu* and *Mahes* as Gods nor will I worship them.
2. I will not regard Rama and Krishna as Gods nor will I worship them.
3. I will not accept Hindu deities like Gauri, Ganapati etc. nor will I worship them.
4. I do not believe that God had taken birth or incarnation in any form.
5. I do not believe that Lord Buddha was the incarnation of *Vishnu*. I believe this propaganda as mischievous and false.
6. I will never perform any *Shraddha* nor will I offer any *Pinda*.
7. I will never act against the tenets of Buddhism.
8. I will never get any *Sanskar* performed by Brahmins.
9. I believe in the principle that all are equal.
10. I will try to establish equality.
11. I will follow the Eight Fold Path of Lord Buddha.
12. I will follow all the ten *Paramitas* of the *Dharma*.
13. I will have compassion on all living beings and will try to look after them .

14. I will not lie.
15. I will not commit theft.
16. I will not indulge in lust or sexual transgression .
17. I will not take any liquor or drink that causes intoxication.
18. I will try to mould my life in accordance with the Buddhist preachings, based on 'Enlightenment', 'Precept' and 'Compassion' .
19. I embrace today the *Bauddha Dhamma* discarding the Hindu Religion which is detrimental to the emancipation of human beings and which believes in inequality and regards human beings other than the Brahmins as low born.
20. This is my firm belief that the *Bauddha Dhamma* is the best religion.
21. I believe that today I am taking new birth.
22. I solemnly take oath that from today onwards I will act according to the *Bauddha Dhamma*.

***Sabbe Satta Suknee Hontu.***

It has been noted above that nearly three lakhs of his followers embraced Buddhism, and to use Ambedkar's own ideology of shepherd, he flocked them into Buddhism. Among those who embraced Buddhism with Ambedkar, were M. B. Niyogi, former Chief Justice of the Nagpur High Court, and Ambedkar's leading Maharastrian Lieutenants. According to Niyogi, the denunciation of Hinduism as was done by Ambedkar while embracing Buddhism had no place in the original Buddhist rituals. The ceremony was over by ten to eleven in the morning. Messages welcoming the great leader and his followers to Buddhism were sent by U Ba Sway, Prime Minister of Burma, U Nu, former Burmese Premier, Dr. Arivind Barua of Calcutta and H.W. Amarsurya from Colombo. It is very important to note that no message from any great Indian leader such as Nehru, Dr.S.Radhakrishnan, C.Rajagopalachari or Dr. Rajendra Prasad was received on the occasion, not to speak of Veer Savarkar. If Nehru believed that there was nothing inconsistent between Indian philosophy, religion and democracy. Hindu religion, he pointed out, had within itself an impressive universalisation. It could adjust itself to change; it was large enough to encompass different and even conflicting beliefs. According to Nehru, it might take a

little time, but religion in India would undergo whatever reorientation was necessary to have it reflected the general welfare of the people. Many times before Hinduism had digested great changes. After Buddhism came to India, Hinduism did not set itself up in competition with Buddhism; it absorbed it.<sup>16</sup> Radhakrishnan believed that the Buddha had attempted to achieve a power of Hinduism.<sup>17</sup>

According to the Buddhist view, the great conversion constituted a new chapter. It had been contended that 'conversion' was not a happy term to discuss the changes, since force and temptation are associated with conversion. It was self-conversion and not conversion that had come to mean giving up one's own faith and embracing something foreign. Some Buddhists said that the *Dharma Chakra* was set evolving by the intrepid leader; and it was the greatest religious revolution which India had witnessed in modern times. Ambedkar thus fulfilled the prediction of Sir William Hunter who said in 1881 that the revival of Buddhism was, one of the possibilities in India.<sup>18</sup>

### **Ambedkar's 'Navayana'(New Vehicle) of Buddhism**

Buddhism is divided, on religious matters into two wellknown schools — *Hinayan*, flourishing in Srilanka, Myanmar(Burma) and Thailand; and *Mahayan* in Tibet, China and Japan. The *Mahayan* comprises (1) the *Madhyamika* or *Sunyavada*; (2) the *Yogacara* or *Vijnanavada* school, while the *Hinayan* comprises (1) the *Sautrantika* school, and (2) the *Vaibhasika* school.<sup>19</sup> In this context Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism led to a new school of Buddhism which may be styled '*Navayana*' or Neo-Buddhism for most of his adult life. A resume of these activities is noted below:

Hinduism is often described as the mother of whom Jainism and Buddhism are two rebel daughters. Buddha was primarily an ethical teacher and reformer, not a metaphysician. The message of his enlightenment as his name indicates — it points to man the way of life that leads beyond suffering. The answers to the four questions raised by Gautam Buddha are known as the Four Noble Truths. They are (1) life in the world is full of suffering. (2) Desire is the cause of

this suffering. (3) It is possible to stop suffering by removing desire. (4) There is a path which leads to the cessation of desire and suffering.<sup>20</sup>

Gautam is gone, but the Buddha remains. The enlightenment, which dawned upon Gautam and transformed him into the immortal Buddha, serves us even today. The *Dharma Chakra*, the wheel of the law, first turned by the Buddha at the Deer Park in Sarnath still revolves as the National Emblem of India. The *Parinirvana* or the Great Decease of the Buddha at Kushinara proved that every one of us might follow the path of 'Buddhahood in this world.' But what is it like? The self and the material world are in a flux (*Saintana*). The 'self-producing and self-consuming' flame and the stream of water are the two symbols generally used to illustrate "flux". It thus seems that each one of the so-called things or happenings is only a series (*vithi*) and the notion of fixity is fictitious. Hence there is a ceaseless movement of all things with no underlying constancy. It is a compromise between two views — belief in Being and non-Being. And this world proceeds on a duality, of the "it is" and "it is not."<sup>21</sup> Neither being nor non-Being is the truth, asserts Buddha, but only Becoming. This does not mean that he denies reality. In fact, he admits it, and gives an explanation of its dynamism. There is incessant change, but at the same time there is nothing that changes: "There is action, but no agent." Hiriyanna is eloquent over this and cites the case of Heraclitus of Greece and that of Bergson of France both after Buddha, as following in the footsteps of Buddha. He says: 'Great indeed should have been the genius that enunciated such a doctrine for the first time.'<sup>22</sup>

Matter exists only in changes and not in a single self-contained entity. Thus the chariot is a mere symbol of the parts of pole, wheels etc. assembled in a particular way. Similarly the self is a level aggregative of certain psychic and physical factors. As a stable entity Buddhism does not deny the self, but it recognises instead a 'fluid self', which, because of its fluidity, is not a series of distinct or dissimilar states. In the very act of analysing the self and dismissing it is not a series of momentary states, posits an enduring self. Hence, "the self is not only a collective, but also a recollective entity."<sup>23</sup> With regard to the apprehension of external objects, a question as to their recognition arises, since everything is in a flux. And the Buddhist answer is that the things

in the two moments of our cognition are only similar and that we mistake them to be the same. In other words, all recognition is erroneous, since similarity is mistaken in it for identity.<sup>24</sup>

The laws of contingent causation is called *dharma* or *dhamma*, *pratityasamutpada* in Sanskrit and *paticcasamupada* in Pali. Etymologically, *pratitya* means 'getting' (something else) and *samutpada* 'origination' (of something else). As observed by Buddha: "He who sees the *paticcasamutpada*, sees the *Dharma*, and he who sees the *Dharma*, sees the *paticcasamutpada*. The doctrine of *Pratityasamutpada* is the foundation of all teachings of Buddha. It is contained in the Second Noble Truth showing us the cessation of suffering. Now, suffering is *Samsara*; cessation of suffering is *Nirvana*. Both are only the few aspects of the same Reality. *Pratityasamutpada* viewed from the view point of reality is *Samsara*; when viewed from the standpoint of reality, it is *Nirvana*.<sup>25</sup> A controversy has raged over Nirvana. Oldenberg and Rhys Davids identify it with negative extinction. But this is not true as demonstrated by Dr. Biswas.<sup>26</sup> The Buddhists seek to annihilate the desire-energy by raising it to zero level. Mathematically this becomes:  $D=1/0$ . Hence, *Nirvana* leads to bliss. And this accords with the Madhyamika interpretation of '*Shunya*', which is indescribable (*avachya*), and not 'nothing', empty void or negative abyss.<sup>27</sup>

It is evident from his activities that even before his conversion Ambedkar was a Buddhist at heart; and in the light of his religious propensity, his concept of religion may better be discussed. He had a profound rational outlook of religion; devoid of metaphysics it was mainly for man on earth. Ambedkar gives four characteristics of religion. First, religion in the sense of morality must remain as the governing principle in every society. Second, religion if it is to function must be in accord with reason which is another name for science. Third, its moral code must recognise the fundamental tenets of liberty, equality and fraternity. Fourth, "religion must not sanctify or ennoble poverty".<sup>28</sup> He has traced four stages in the evolution of religion: (i) personal salvation of man's soul; (ii) human brotherhood based on moral principles, underlying conduct; (iii) hero-worship of personalities satisfying wants of human beings; and (iv)

deification of miracle-performer.<sup>29</sup> Ambedkar was opposed to supernaturalism, because he was a rationalist. He agreed to Buddha's repudiation of supernaturalism with three objectives (i) to lead men to the path of rationalism; (ii) to free man so as to enable him to go in search of truth; and (iii) to remove the most potent source of superstition.

Ambedkar's observations on religion are as follows: (1) "I consider the foundations of religion to be essential to life and practices of society." (2) "Religion is not an opium as it is held by some. I want religion, but I do not want hypocrisy in the name of religion." (3) "Religion is a part of one's inheritance." (4) "Man cannot live by bread alone. He has a mind which needs food for thought. Religion installs hope in man and drives him to activity." (5) "The religion which discriminates between followers is partial and the religion which treats crores of its adherents worse than dogs and criminals and inflicts upon them insufferable disabilities is no religion at all. Religion is not the appellation for such an unjust order." (6) "Religion and slavery are incompatible."<sup>30</sup>

### Definition

According to Ambedkar "religion must be judged by social standards, based on social ethics." Thus, he connected religion with the social well-being of the people. And religion need have 'spiritual principles' that are 'universal' and applicable to all countries and to all races. Judged by this yardstick, Hinduism appears as "a much of sacrificial, social, political and sanitary rules and regulations, all mixed up." It is a 'law' or 'legalised class ethics'.<sup>31</sup>

Ambedkar enumerated the evils of *Hindutva*: First, in Hinduism, according to Ambedkar, the belief in god gives rise to the belief in the efficacy of worship and prayer and the efficacy of worship and prayer gives rise to the office of priest and the priest is the evil, genius who creates all superstition and destroys the growth of the right view. Second, the law of past action completely betrays the spirit of revolt. Third, Hinduism is a riddle of the contradictions between dignified thought and base behaviour (Mooknayak, 31 January, 1920). Fourth, it tends to deprive moral life of freedom and spontaneity and reduces it merely to servile conformity to externally imposed rules. Fifth, there is no loyalty to ideas, but only conformity to commands.

Sixth, laws are inequitable and not the same for all. Seventhly, the Hindu Code has the character of fixity and finality. Eighth, "Hinduism and social union are incompatible. Hinduism creates an eagerness to separate." Ninth, *Vedantic* idealism is a Brahminical counterpoise to the liberalising role of the Buddhist movement. Tenth, Hinduism is characterised by inequality and casteism.<sup>32</sup>

Ambedkar wrote a book named *The Buddha and His Dhamma*.<sup>33</sup> The book was published within a year of his death. The Chairman of the People's Education Society, Justice R.R. Bhole has stated in his 'preface' that "this new and consistent commentary of the *Dhamma* by Ambedkar became almost the Bible of the Indian Buddhist." It was later published in Hindi as well as Marathi version. These publications served a very useful purpose to Indian Buddhists who treated this book as 'the New Testament' for studying the *Dhamma* singly or in groups in their localities and for devoting some of their everyday to reflect on it. It is the way of the Buddha without comparison that they find in this devotional Buddhist *Nikaya* and in it they find a substantial source of religious inspirations." It is because of this that Ambedkar has been styled as the founder of the Buddhist *Navayana*. Besides, Ambedkar also wrote a small book called *Buddha and the Future of His Religion*.<sup>34</sup>

The word, 'religious', is derived from 'religion'. According to Cicero, it is derived from a root 'leg', meaning 'take up, gather, count or observe', i.e. 'to observe the signs of a Divine communication.' Servius thinks that it comes from the root 'leg'—, meaning 'to bind' and 'religion' means 'a relationship', i.e. 'a communication between the human and the Super-human.' Both uses are found in St. Augustine the Great. The first is the counterpart of the Greek word, *paraterisis*, meaning 'the scrupulous observation of omens and the performance of ritual'. Jesus used the word in this sense when he said: "The Kingdom of God cometh not with *paraterisis*." Now most Europeans understand by the word a fixed relationship between the human self and some non-human entity. And from Suez eastward this relationship is the *hodos* or way of the Pharisees. Similarly early Christianity is described as "that way"; Buddhism as the Noble Eight Fold Path; Shintoism as "the way of the Gods", Confucianism as "the way." Even communist

Russia rejecting these has surrendered to the Dialectical Process , which is also a “way”.<sup>35</sup>

Religion has its counterpart in the Sanskrit word *Dharma*. The *Mahabharata* uses the word in two senses. The first derives the word thus - *Dhana*-√*ri* + *mak* : it means that whence wealth is got. And *Dharma* denotes wealth, worldly and other worldly. The second sense derives the word from the root *dhri* with the addition of the suffix *man*. It means that which sustains all. From this a deeper meaning is derived by Tagore. He gives a third sense to *dharma* to the following words : “*Dharma* is the innermost nature, the essence , the implicit truth, in all things. *Dharma* is the ultimate purpose that is working in our self. When any wrong is done we say that *dharma* is violated, meaning that the lie has been given to our true nature.”<sup>36</sup>

According to Ambedkar religion is a word with no fixed meaning. It has varied from time to time. There are three stages in the evolutions of its meaning. The first is of magic. Any weird performance done to control the phenomenon of lightning, rain and floods was called magic. The second stage related to rituals, beliefs, ceremonies, prayers and sacrifices, which developed to propitiate a benevolent power and also to conciliate an energy power. Later this power came to be identified with God or the creator. A third stage came : it was taken for granted that God created this world and man. This was followed by a belief that man has a soul that is eternal and answerable to God for his actions in the world.

However, there are points of distinction between religion and *Dharma*. First, religion is personal, whereas *Dharma* is social. Second, the former can exist if there exists only one individual. But *Dharma* needs atleast two for its existence. Third , a society cannot do without *Dharma*. And it has to choose one of the three alternatives. Society may choose not to have any *Dharma* as an instrument of government. In that it results in anarchy. Society may choose police or dictatorship as an instrument of government. Lastly, it may choose *Dharma* plus the Magistrate where people fail to observe the *Dharma*. In the first two cases liberty is lost; and only in the third liberty survives. Hence, people desirous of liberty must have *Dharma*. Fourth, *Dharma* according to the Buddha, consists of *prajna* i.e. understanding and *karuna*, i.e. love. But religion is different from this definition of *Dharma*. Finally, both differ as to their purpose; religion

is to explain the origin of the world, while *Dharma* is to construct the world.

Truly speaking morality is not religion-oriented. Religion consists of god, soul, prayers, worship, rituals, ceremonies and sacrifices. But morality comes in only where man comes in relation to man. Besides, it enters religion as a side wind to maintain peace and order. Secondly, every religion preaches morality, but morality is not the root of religion. Thirdly, religion is a triangular peace, namely god and two neighbours who are children of god. But morality is a wagon attached to religion : it is attachable and detachable as the occasion requires. Finally, the action of morality in the functioning of religion is casual and occasional : it is not effective.

According to Ambedkar morality is *Dharma* and *Dharma* is morality. In other words, in *Dharma* morality takes the place of god, although there is no god in *Dharma*. Second, morality arises in *Dharma* from the direct necessity for man to love man. It is for his own good that man has to love man. Third, morality must be sacred and universal. Three factors are responsible to make morality sacred. The first factor is the social need to protect the best in the face of the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest. The second factor is to put a stop to conflict of group interests by man of the common rules of mortality. And the third factor is to safeguard the growth of the individual, since his interests may not be safe under the group rule.<sup>37</sup>

### Critics of conversion

Ambedkar had to face criticism from the Hindus for his conversion to Buddhism . Thus Gandhi criticised his declaration to renounce Hinduism (Harijan, 21 March, 1936): "Religion is not a matter of barter. (It) is a more integral part of one's own self than one's body. Change of faith will not serve the causes." Here Gandhi repudiates what he preached earlier (young India, June , 1, 1921 at pages 172-73). "Religion is as much an ideal as the acceptance of a thing. It is as necessary to reject untruth as it is to accept truth. All religions teach that two appropriate forces act upon us and that the human behaviour consists in a series of eternal rejections and acceptance." Secondly, he separates religion from body and associates it with self. He does not consider if religion and self can exist without body. All are constituents of single entity, and if one, specially the body suffers, the entire thing suffers. In fact this is what he said in respect of

non-co-operation movement: "I found it impossible to soothe suffering patients with a song from Kabir. The hungry millions ask for one poem-invigorating food" (Young India, October 13, 1921 at pp.324-26). Now he goes back on his own word. Thirdly, here Gandhi is wrong in stating that change of faith will not serve the causes. It may not achieve all its objectives. But it will certainly have some objectives fulfilled, e.g., the sense of self-respect, supremacy. What Tagore said of Gandhi applies equally to Ambedkar: "Perhaps he will fail to wean man from their inequities, but he will always be remembered as one who made his life a lesson for all ages to come."<sup>38</sup>

There were other critics as well. V. D. Savarkar spoke in terms of a fighting soldier of Hinduism. He warned the Depressed Classes and asked Ambedkar to fight valiantly for equality. Savarkar belonged to the privileged class and could not realise the sufferings of the Untouchables. What was the result of the fight by Ambedkar? He failed. In fact, it was not possible to score victory against heavy odds. Casteism is so much entrenched in the *Brahmanic* mind with religious sanctity that it was next to impossible to eradicate it. 43 years after Ambedkar's death, the picture of oppression of the Untouchables and the Backward Classes is now as lucid if not more as it was before. Thus the Statesman, 5 July, 1990 at page 1 reports under caption "Upper Castes have their way in Gujrat" that the B. J. P.—run Municipal Corporation ordered the bulldozing of 65 huts, mostly of Harijans at Brahmaninagar in Ahmedabad city (and) at Navalpur village in Sabarkantha 50 Patel farmers publicly whipped, lynched and hanged a Backward Caste youth from a tree on June 23". Hence, Ambedkar's decision was correct. Let Savarkar answer a simple question: "If he feels as much for the Depressed Classes, how is it that he did never lift a finger to protect them from the inequities practised by the caste Hindus on them?" In this the verdict of history will be that Savarkar might be a leader and fighter for the Hindu cause of inequality against the Depressed Classes, but a "lost leader" of whom Browning spoke thus:

Blot out his name, then, record one lost soul more.

One task more declined, one more footpath untrod.

Rajaji described Ambedkar's move as diabolical. Here the boot was on the other leg. And

this Rajaji failed to see. As a result he castigated the victim without punishing the aggressor. This was due to two factors as noted by Ambedkar in his preface to *'Who were the Shudras'* thus: "The Brahmin has a two - fold interest in the maintenance of the sanctity of (the Shastra). In the first place being the production of his forefathers his filial duty leads him to defend it even at the cost of truth. In the second place , as it supports the privileges of the Brahmins, he is careful not to do anything which would undermine its authority." Malaviya and Gandhi also failed to carry out the promises made at the time of the Poona pact for the uplift of the Depressed Classes. And this was a betrayal by the Caste Hindus.

This caste Hindu prejudice has been put in a new garb under the label of communism by W. N. Kuber in his *Dr. Ambedkar - A Critical Study* (1973) and *B. R. Ambedkar* (1978). In the latter (p.880) Kuber has made four points. First , Ambedkar invented the theory that the Untouchables were once Buddhists in order to facilitate his conversion to Buddhism . Second , this conversion went to counter class war. Third, this was a reactionary step, since Ambedkar's approach to Marxism was wrong. Fourth, he first wrote the answer and thereafter outlined his theory. In a nutshell, it may be stated that it is a historical fact that the Untouchables were once Buddhists. Secondly, the critic has confused wrongly religion with politics . Thirdly, there was no misconception about Marxism. A veteran communist M.N.Roy who helped Russia build up communism there had to admit subsequently that 'Marxism is not the horoscope of the world.' Hence, he favoured "radical humanism." It was the change of heart .

Ambedkar had been interested in Buddhism for most of his adult life. He had been drawn to Buddhist teachings since his student days. Further reflection and reading convinced him that the path to social equality and psychological liberation for the 'Untouchables' lay in the teachings of the Buddha. He studied Buddhism deeply and extensively and met a number of people who had become interested in this religion. The writings of the Tamil Buddhists, specially of P. L. Narasu and of Mahatma Jyotiba Phooley, a nineteenth century radical social reformer of Maharashtra, made a strong impact upon him. He himself claimed that he had three *gurus* — the Buddha, Kabir and Jyotiba Phooley. He travelled to Ceylon and Burma to see living Buddhism

in these countries. He had prepared his followers psychologically for a conversion from Hinduism 1935 onwards. But his conversion took place quite late on October 14, 1956. In less than two months after his '*diksha*' Ambedkar died (December 7, 1956). Thus he died a Buddhist and before his death set in motion a movement that soon involved over three million people. Another huge ceremony was held in Bombay ten days after his death in which Ananda Kausalyayana, a pali scholar and Hindi speaking Punjabi monk, initiated thousands to Buddhism. But these massive conversions mainly affected only low castes, particularly the Mahars of Maharashtra, the community of Ambedkar, who had been involved for decades in a battle for political, social and religious rights. Their conversion, however, made the authority of Babasaheb Ambedkar unquestioned for them. A few even refer to him as a "second Buddha" and describe the Nagpur *Diksha* as a new "*Dharmachakra-Pravartna*."<sup>39</sup>

The chief vehicle for transmitting and interpreting the new faith of Ambedkar is his book, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*.<sup>40</sup> It was written in English at the end of his life, published posthumously and subsequently translated into Hindi and Marathi. It is a rationalised biography of the Buddha and contains a selection from Buddhist pali works. Ambedkar's aim was to produce a Bible for his followers. It was not intended to be a scholarly work. In it the events of Buddha's life are narrated in free style and much liberty was followed in the selection, application and interpretation of the Pali passages. No attempt was made to maintain a distinction between the translation of the original passage and Ambedkar's commentary on it.<sup>41</sup> The liberty taken with the Pali passages naturally earned the criticism of a number traditional Buddhists. However, in the Hindi translation of the volume, Bhadanta Ananda Kausalyayana, who identified the original texts from which Ambedkar drew, observed, though somewhat inaccurately, that it represented a "new orientation, but not a distortion" and that all central doctrines of Buddhism were present in it.

Ambedkar himself offered the criteria, by which he determined the authenticity of Buddha's teachings, thus :

“ There is one test”, he says , which is available, if there is anything which could be said with confidence, it is : He(the Buddha) was nothing if not rational, if not logical .Anything, therefore which is rational and logical, other things being equal may be taken to be word of the Buddha. The second thing is that the Buddha never cared to enter into a discussion which was not profitable for man’s welfare. Therefore, anything attributed to the Buddha which did not relate to man’s welfare can not be accepted to be the word of the Buddha.”<sup>42</sup>

It is evident from Ambedkar’s statement that two characteristics of the Buddha’s teachings were accepted as tests to judge. Whether any particular writing conforms to the test as laid down by him, namely (1) its rationality on one and (2) its social message on the other.

Ambedkar described the Buddha as “ a ‘reformer, full of the most earnest moral purpose and trained in all the intellectual culture of his time, who had the originality and the courage to putforth deliberately and with a knowledge of opposing views, the doctrine of a salvation to found here , in this life, in inward change of heart to be brought about by the practice of self-culture and self-control.”<sup>43</sup> As pointed out by P. L. Lakshmi Narsu <sup>44</sup> “The dictum accepted in all schools of Buddhism is that nothing can be accepted as the teaching of the Master, which is not in strict accord with reason.” Thus, in fighting the Hindu ideas of God, soul and *avatara* upon which , they believe, the caste system rests, Ambedkar and his followers appeal in the last analysis no other authority than the human reason itself. The religious implications of taking reason and logic as ultimate authorities do not appear to concern them.<sup>45</sup>

### **Ambedkar’s Navayana and Traditional Buddhism : Their Differences**

Ambedkar had to introduce a number of innovations in traditional Buddhism. These innovations are not isolated phenomena. New views on the Buddhist social ethics have been expressed in other countries of South and South East Asia. But the peculiarity of Ambedkar’s *Navayana* is that the degree of divergence from the traditional doctrine is very much greater than those of other countries. Hence, the *Navayana* may be regarded as a phenomenon of modernisation of Buddhism in Asian. In this context the differences between the traditional Buddhism and *Navayana* are noted below :<sup>46</sup>

1. The 'rationalism' of the Buddha serves chiefly, in Ambedkar's Buddhism, to deny the existence of God and '*atman*'. Whereas the Buddha on these questions apparently maintained silence, Ambedkar's Buddha is certain and explicit. "He began by saying that his *Dharma* had nothing to do with God and soul. His *Dharma* has nothing to do with life after death", wrote Ambedkar of the Buddha's first sermon, for in his eyes the greatest danger of the belief in God and soul is the basis it provides for belief in caste. So Ambedkar is of the opinion that 'atheism' is the key element of Buddhism, as much as hallmark as its rationality and egalitarianism.
2. Ambedkar's rejection of the existence of '*atman*' led him to the rejection of the 'belief in *samsara*, i.e., transmigration of the soul', 'belief in *moksha* or salvation of the soul', and 'belief in karma' (as) the determination of man's position in present life. The Buddha denied the fatalistic view of *karma*. According to this 'scientific' view, rebirth as a concept applies only to the natural components of a being. When the body dies, the four elements disperse and live on. While any psychological or spiritual dimension to the concept of rebirth is denied, *karma* as moral law is acknowledged. It is operative only within one's present life and the general moral order.
3. If the Buddha's gospel is essentially social, so is '*dukkha*', the central Buddhist notion of suffering or sorrow. "The recognition of suffering (is) the real basis of religion" writes Ambedkar in his version of the Buddha's first sermon. But this suffering is the condition of misery and poverty, wrought by social and economic injustice, "Man's misery is the result of man's inequality to man." In this view the central insight of the traditional Buddhist vision of '*dukkha*' is omitted and suffering is interpreted as a social phenomenon.
4. Ambedkar's vision of suffering as primarily a social phenomenon entails a reinterpretation of the Four Noble Truths. For, if one's suffering results from social injustice from without, then its cause and alleviation do not relate directly to one's desire or craving. In Ambedkar's version of the Buddha's first sermon, therefore, "the recognition of human suffering" can be viewed as equivalents to the first and fourth Noble Truths. But to the

second and third Noble truths, this sermon presents analogous teachings, for no attention is given to the cause of this suffering nor any mention is made of craving or desire (*tanha of the Chattari Ariya Satyani*).

5. Ambedkar gives a new account of the '*Mahabhinishkramana*' (great renunciation) of Gautama Siddhartha. The causes for Gautam's renunciation of his princely life were not the traditional Four Sights. Ambedkar found it irrational to suppose that a man of 29 would not have been exposed earlier to the presence of sickness and death : "These are common events occurring by the hundreds and the Buddha could not have failed to come across them earlier."
6. The Salvation to which Buddha points is seen as a 'kingdom of righteousness on earth', and even enlightenment itself is presented in a purely pragmatic way: " On the night of the last day of the fourth week," Ambedkar writes "light dawned upon him(on the Buddha). He realised that there were two problems. The first problem was that there was suffering in the world and the second problem was how to remove this suffering and make mankind happy."
7. Ambedkar played down the role of the *Sangha* in the history of Buddhism. To this end he stressed that, the Buddha clearly had the laity in mind when he preached. According to him the Five precepts and the Eight Fold path included in the original Buddhism had been addressed to house-holders. The *Sangha* was instituted by the Buddha to serve as a model and to show that the ideals he preached were practical.
8. Ambedkar thought that India's aboriginal stock had common ethnic roots which he identified as Naga. Being subjected to tortures by the ruling class the Nagas became Buddhist in large numbers. They were progressively excluded from the main stream of the society and eventually driven out as the ancestors of the Untouchables. In his conversion speech he pointed to the Nagas as chief propagators who "spread the teachings of *Bhagwan* Buddha all over India." The *Koliyas* , to whom Gautam was related on his mother's side belonged

to this ethnic stock. Hence, the Nagas were connected to the *Dhamma's* origin through blood and were instrumental in its spread. It may be noted here that the name Nagpur is derived from the Nagas.

9. Ambedkar is neither worshiped nor prayed to, nor of course is the Buddha. However, on every occasion both are garlanded ; the Buddha first, and *Parampujya Babasaheb* Ambedkar next are addressed before the delivery of any speech. Some of his followers regard Ambedkar as *Bodhisattva* in recognition of his role as the savior of modern Indian converts to Buddhism. As a mode of honouring him to his name is added to the list of refuges that is *Bhimang Swaranang Gachchami*. As a result the “three Jewels” become four: (1) I go for refuge to Buddha ; (2) I go for refuge to the *Dhamma* (doctrinee) ; (3) I go for refuge to the *Sangha* (order of monks); (4) I go for refuge to Bhima.<sup>47</sup>
10. The new buildings dedicated to the Buddhist religion of Ambedkar’s movement in Maharashtra as well as the old buildings converted to Buddhists’ use are called ‘*viharas*’. The words for temple in Marathi—*Deul* and *Mandir*— are not used. These ‘*viহারs*’, however, are not the living quarters for the monks but a meeting place for the laity. Such a multipurpose *Vihara* is a plain rectangular structure.
11. In its early days the Ambedkar movement was led by his Republican Party members because of paucity of the trained *Bhikshus* for *diksha*. Religious conversion at the hands of political leaders might seemed strange to the outsiders, but it was unavoidable.
12. Ambedkar’s followers celebrate four great observances (1) *Dharma ‘Diksha’* day; (2) *Buddha Jayanti* ; (3) Ambedkar’s death memorial day and (4) *Ambedkar Jayanti*.

Ambedkar said : “ Once it is realised that Buddhism is a social gospel , its revival would be an ever lasting event.” He had the devine satisfaction of having accomplished a great deed, and set in motion the wheel of *Dharma* once again thereby establishing the revival of Buddhism in India. He had fulfilled the prediction of Sir William Hunter who had said as early as 1881 that “the revival of Buddhism is, I repeat one of the possibilities in India”.<sup>48</sup> Tagore, too had sent

forth a call, eagerly awaiting the arrival of the Buddha, singing:<sup>49</sup>

‘Bring to this country once again  
the blessed name  
Which made the land of the birth sacred  
to all distant lands!  
Let the great awakening under the Bodhi Tree  
be fulfilled .....  
Let open the doors that are barred,  
and the resounding conch shell  
Proclaim thy arrival at Bharat’s gate.  
Let, through innumerable voices,  
the gospel of an unmeasurable love  
announce thy call.

Ambedkar accords in his *Navayana* great weight to the egalitarian aspect of Buddha’s life and message. The scriptural stories of the Buddha’s acceptance of and regard for the low and outcaste followers, such as the sweeper Sumita, the barbar Upali, the Untouchables Sopaka and Suppiya and others, are featured in the *Navayana*. Some outward symbols of traditional Buddhism are stressed — the image of the Buddha, the study of Pali, the use of Pali ritual phrases in group ‘*Vandana*’, honour shown to the caves of Ajanta, Ellora, Aurangabad, Nasik and Junnar and pilgrimages to Sanchi, Sarnath and Buddha Gaya.<sup>50</sup>

Ambedkar’s *Navayana* represents three elements —(1) the elements in the past of the Buddhists; (2) the work of Ambedkar himself, its social unity in the face of continued prejudice and its rejection of Hinduism as a religion of inequality; and (3) the retention of some Hindu or Indian elements— the *tehguru idea*, the public procession, memorising the days honouring the birth or death of greatmen. This amalgam of traditional Buddhism, the Mahar past and the socio-religious practices of Hindu society in general has led the followers of Ambedkar to create some new and interesting development on their own. This is seen in the multipurpose *Vihars* as well as the initiative and responsibility of the lay leaders. Ambedkar’s view of the *Sangha*, it is asserted.

“Whether accurate or not, has some relevance for a period when Indian Buddhists have little or no contact with monks, *Bhikshus*, especially native-speaking ones, are still rare, and Ambedkar’s emphasis on the dignity and role of the laity helps foster an attitude of religious self-reliance. Although the need to train more monks is expressed there also is talk of the need to develop an *upasaka* or lay Sangha and of its appropriateness now in a time and community that lack the economic base for a full-time order.”<sup>51</sup>

### Conversion as Psychological Transformation

The psychological impact of Buddhism on Ambedkar cannot be easily judged by visible science. One way of judging it is the test laid down in the Buddhist literature, writings and songs. A song of Waman Kardak reads thus:

“Here there is no caste, no useless black-white splits,  
 My Gautam Buddha loves each one.  
 The door is open for all-*Shudra*, *Chandala*, Weaver,  
 Gardener, *Brahman*, Fisherman, all merge  
 in the triad of Buddha, Sangha, Dharma.  
 There are no separate paths, all are brothers.  
 There is no pollution, no harassment,  
 in Buddha’s religion.  
 There is no shelter for hypocrisy  
 in the place of my Buddha.  
 There are no gods; there is no fate,  
 no deed binding one to a fatal direction.”<sup>52</sup>

In his article on this singer, Gangadhar Pantavane writes, “Bhimrao (Ambedkar) has placed us in the lap of a life-giving religion and so has awakened psychological independence ... This is the religion of Gautam, who with love won the world, and the spine of this religion is humanity.” The profoundly satisfying psychological meaning of the conversion is clear. The same sense of

pride in Buddhism, and in the same degree the love and respect for Babasaheb Ambedkar is found in the numerous folk songs current in the Neo-Buddhist community. A new development called 'Dalit' literature, is more concerned with the injustices still inflicted upon the lower castes than with religion, even here, two of major leaders of this literary movement and its concurrent social arm, the Dalit Panthers, support the idea that conversion brought psychological freedom. Namdev Dhasal, a forceful poet and once the major figure in the communist faction of the Dalit Panthers, is reported as having said in an interview, thus:

“Conversion to Buddhism... freed the Scheduled castes from mental and psychological enslavement... Religion (has) an attraction for the common man and it was not easy to change his attitude toward it ... (The Buddhists have) liberated themselves from old ideas of *Karma* and destiny and from worship of Hindu gods. To the extent this facilitated their adopting rational attitudes to their condition in society, the chances of their actively striving to change their conditions were better.”<sup>53</sup>

According to Raja Dhale, the leader of the non-communist, 'Ambedkar' faction of the Dalit Panthers, Buddhist conversion is simply the turning again of the wheel of '*Dhamma*', the return to the Untouchables' former identity. Buddhism is for all ; it is relevant, consistent, complete. But if a Buddhist does not himself turn the wheel of '*Dhamma*' by his own thought , he becomes an Untouchable again.<sup>54</sup> Raja Dhale's political or literary writing contains little of Buddhism, but it seems that conversion is a necessary part of his own identity. In terms of Eleonor zelliot<sup>55</sup> the psychological freedom from the sense of being a polluting person is a major achievement. It is because of this that she names her book, "*From Untouchable to Dalit*" a title itself illustrates her observations. *The Times of India*<sup>56</sup> also confirms this – “They (Buddhists) seem to have got rid of their age-old inferiority complex. They have a fresh sense of identity and a newly acquired confidence. What is more, the youth among them have completely shed the superstitions that had cramped their existence and have adopted a more rational view of life.”

It is a fact that the new class of rational Buddhist youth would not accept too much of rituals . In other words the sort of imitation of Hindu processions, *yatras*, festivals for involving the Buddhist masses is discouraged by educated Buddhists. Of course, it must be said that the mass of Buddhists in the slums of cities, or the landless in rural areas , live in the same fashion

as the desperately poor in any culture. It is difficult here for the Neo-Buddhist to produce a new Buddhist morality or a new Buddhist life-style. The young people have become educated and the Buddhists no longer participate in the Hindu public practices so long denied them, not now out of prohibition but out of a sense of exclusiveness.

It may be noted here that the rationale for conversion was psychological and the benefits have been psychological. But this is not enough. The Conversion has one fact of a multilevel effort. Economic improvement for the masses, freedom from village harassment and urban prejudice, room at the top for the ambitious and the able — all this must come through some other paths. The conversion seems to have helped create the will to probe every possible means, and it has created the means to preserve group unity. This separatism has been described as self-defeating to Buddhists, however, separatism has marked all movements of an inferior group for equality and this is something new. It seems to be an essential psychological weapon in the maintenance of the group unity necessary for organised efforts. In the words of Eleanor Zelliot: "In choosing Buddhism as the vehicle for separatism, Ambedkar committed his people to wholly Indian, basically, non-violent, rational, potentially, creative way."<sup>57</sup>

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