

Preface

Historical researches on the Depressed Classes and the ideas and activities of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar are still at the threshold of beginning, and no wonder, there have been hitherto very few studies on the socio-economic, religio-cultural and political background of the Neo-Buddhist Movement in India, which was a part of the reform movement organised by the rising depressed classes for the establishment of a society based on equality, justice and fraternity under Ambedkar's leadership. The Neo-Buddhist Movement though was a reassertion of the positives of a millennia old socio-religious revolution organised by the Buddha, it eluded the usually common revivalist trends, and certainly it was a relevant awakening at a historical phase of the dumb millions who had suffered the scourges of ill-treatment and superstitions of the ages goneby. In this proposed thesis, the background of the Neo-Buddhist Movement, the relevant socio-religious ideas of Ambedkar, the nature, philosophy, historical necessity and the impact of the Neo-Buddhist Movement will be meticulously analysed and delineated. This work will fill a gap in Indian historical studies.

India in the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth century witnessed the birth of many socio-religious reformers and reform movements. Of these reformers, some were revivalists and some again were eclectic to the length of conforming the best teachings of all religions. The achievements of all these reformers are well known in history; but unfortunately, hardly any of them belonged to the depressed classes, better known then as the untouchables. Men like Swami Dayanand Saraswati and Vivekanand inspite of their anti-caste utterances, could virtually do the precious little to change the inter-caste hatred and exclusively inhuman treatment meted out to the socio-economically downtrodden or the Sudras. Their ideas and activities being imprecise on this aspect of reforms, left behind the question of arousing the Depressed Classes by a leader of their own in a new way. They had to wait until the second decade of the 20th Century when Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar came to the scene. Though, Mahatma Gandhi, much acclaimed for humanitarian works among the Harijans, flourished in the contemporary period of Ambedkar, yet his was no movement organised among the untouch-

ables against the age-old unjust privileges enjoyed by the caste Hindus; his was to strike a chord of compromise between different Hindu communities. Ambedkar not only struggled for the amelioration of the untouchables, he gave them a message of regeneration and a resurgence through the spread of education, socio-political consolidation and ultimately by heralding the beginning of the Neo-Buddhist Movement.

This work holds on the idea that Ambedkar stood distinct and unique by his tremendous efforts in order to bring a radical change in the socio-economic and cultural awareness, status and self-dignity of the out-caste. Himself being a victim and sufferer of inter-caste hatred and exploitation since childhood, Ambedkar's understanding about the groaning of the Untouchables under the wheel of the caste system and Brahmanical Hinduism throughout the ages, had grown so immense that he struggled for nothing less than equality, liberty and fraternity to be established not only in the body politics of India, but in all spheres of Indian life. Human rights and true democracy formed the inner core of his social reform movement and political activities. For this he wanted the total annihilation of the caste system by way of rudimentary reforming the socio-cultural foundation of Hindu Society in practice. And obviously for this purpose he had ready references to the sermons of the Buddha. "Educate, Agitate and Organise" were his message to the downtrodden.

The present research-investigation detects the fact that primarily Ambedkar wanted to reform Hinduism in theory and practice; and that he with a few lacs of his followers got converted to Buddhism was but his last resort. He tried his level best to change and break the shell of privileges and superiority complex of the high caste Hindus to the effect of setting up a new socio-economic and political code wherewithal caste system would be replaced by equality and justice. For this reason; he began his movement by leading the untouchables to 'water places', 'wells', 'Dharmashalas' and Hindu temples to which their entry was prohibited. He did not become a Buddhist outright , but much later only in 1956 , waiting for twenty one years even after the 13th October,1935 when he had given a hint at not to die as a Hindu.

Ambedkar's erudition was versatile to match with his fiery spirit of fighting for the cause of the untouchables. Having been a pragmatic philosopher, he could not find any consistency and harmony in the theology of the Hindus, and therefore, assailed the formalistic, irrational and

idiosyncratic practices of the Hindu. He even meticulously criticised the Vedas; the Gita, the Puranas and the Epics for having sanctioned caste and *Varnashrama* as perpetual walls dividing humanity. He considered the Brahmins responsible for the woes , suffering and backwardness of India. Thus doing and saying so much against Hinduism and the Brahmins he rendered himself as the earstwhile enemy of the high caste people in India. Moreover, all his attempts from the thirties of the 20th century to reform Hinduism and change the minds of the Hindus failed. Later on having been increasingly disillusioned by the apathetic outlook of the Congress leaders towards the questions of annihilating caste and the Hindu Code Bill , which he produced in the parliament intending to eliminate many of the evils from society including injustice to women, he consequently determined to get converted and begin conversion to Buddhism , which itself, undoubtedly, had been the earliest protest movement against caste division, inhumanity and social injustice. Ambedkar went a long way justifying coversion to Buddhism on the ground that it was no alienation from Indian culture ; rather it was Buddhism which founded the glory of Indian culture in all the horizons of Asia.

In this dissertation it is analysed why Ambedkar even being critical of Hinduism protected himself and his people from being drifted towards Christianity, Islam, and Zorastrianism. Apart from being afraid of hammering at the fabrics of Indian culture by conversion to any religion of foreign origin, he gave serious contemplation upon the dangers that Pan-Islamism could pose to the peace loving world. Inspite of his deep respect to and interest in Sikhism , he discarded the hope of getting converted to it, mainly for its gradually becoming a bit martial in character, though , for historical reasons, and for its occasionally sectarian commitment. The study of all the pros and cons ultimately led him to Buddhism, which by all consideration was the most universal , rational and humanitarian in one hand , and absolutely Indian and oriental on the other.

This work delineates the nature, depth and pervasiveness of the Neo-Buddhist Movement which Ambedkar began in 1956. To what extend it was new and how it maintained connection with the old is explored considerably. As a whole the philosophy of the Neo-Buddhist Movement is analysed. The historical relevance and impact of the Dalit culture and literature are also elaborated.