

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar: The necessity of Conversion

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Citation: Mahender Singh Dhakad, (2024) Dr. B.R. Ambedkar: The necessity of Conversion, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(1), 1864-1869

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i1.6694

After the Yeola declaration, where Ambedkar said that he would not die as a Hindu, A Conference of Mahars was convened by him on the 30th and 31st of May 1936 in Bombay to assess the support of people from his own caste for the conversion movement. Around thirty-five thousand Untouchable Mahars from far-flung areas came to attend the Conference. Ambedkar gave an important speech at the Conference where he stated that Hinduism did not treat the Untouchables as human beings. Hinduism prohibited them from entering the temples. Hinduism did not allow them to drink water. It was Hinduism which did not allow them to get an education. A religion which prohibited righteous relations between two humans should not be called a religion but a display of force. A religion which precluded one class from getting an education and bearing arms was not a religion from any point of view but a mockery of human life. A religion that forces the uneducated to stay uneducated and the impoverished to stay in poverty can not be regarded as a true religion but rather as a form of punishment. Ambedkar made it clear that religion is for humanity, not the other way around.¹

According to Ambedkar, conversion was deemed necessary for five reasons. Primarily, it was seen as a means for the Untouchables to transcend their societal isolation. Ambedkar argued that the Depressed Classes, entrenched within Hindu society, grappled with profound social ostracism. Thus, breaking this isolation was imperative for their liberation. By affiliating themselves with a community devoid of caste-based prejudices, they could effectively dismantle the barriers of social segregation. It was proposed that they forge bonds with a non-Hindu community whose camaraderie extended beyond caste distinctions.²

Secondly, the pursuit of social liberty was deemed indispensable by Ambedkar. He posited that for the Untouchables, attaining social emancipation held greater significance than mere legal entitlements. According to his perspective, conversion stood as a crucial means towards achieving spiritual emancipation and fostering societal equality. A pivotal inquiry for Ambedkar revolved around the potential of conversion to eradicate the deep-seated inferiority complex among the Untouchables. He pondered whether religion possessed the capacity to fundamentally alter the psyche of this marginalized community. Ambedkar contended that, drawing from psychological insights, religion held the power to alleviate an individual's sense of inferiority complex. This assertion stemmed from the belief that religion, by instilling hope and fostering confidence, could empower individuals in navigating life's adversities, irrespective of their cultural or societal background. However, Ambedkar emphasized that such transformative potential could only be realized under the condition that the religion in question viewed every individual not as a debased and insignificant outcaste, but rather as an equal member of the human community.³

Thirdly, the imperative of conversion arose as a response to the entrenched class conflict between the Caste Hindus and the Untouchables. Ambedkar conceptualized Untouchability as a manifestation of class struggle between these two groups – the Caste Hindus and the Depressed Classes. In his analysis, caste epitomized an injustice perpetrated by one class upon another within Hindu society. This struggle stemmed from the hierarchical social statuses accorded to the Caste Hindus and the Untouchables within the caste framework. Caste delineated the prescribed manner in which one class should interact with another, thereby exacerbating tensions. The intensification of this conflict ensued when the Untouchables began asserting their demands for equitable treatment alongside the Caste Hindus. Ambedkar contends that without this assertion, contentious issues such as serving chapatis, adopting refined attire, assuming the sacred thread, utilizing metal vessels for water carriage, and the groom's ceremonial horseback ride would not have been subjects of contention. However, whenever the Depressed Classes breached the societal norms dictated by the Caste Hindus, visible conflicts invariably erupted. In essence, the conflict between the Untouchables and the Hindu Caste was not a sporadic event but rather an enduring and pervasive aspect of social dynamics within Hindu society.⁴

According to Ambedkar, the Depressed Classes needed to cultivate strength to prevail in their struggle. He delineated three distinct forms of strength attainable by individuals in this world: physical, financial, and psychological. Firstly, physical strength, or manpower, was a critical factor. However, it was evident that the Depressed Classes, constituting a minority dispersed across the country, lacked the numerical strength

necessary for self-defense. Consequently, they remained vulnerable and unable to assert their rights effectively.

Financial strength, the second form of strength identified by Ambedkar, was intricately linked to manpower. Despite possessing a certain level of human resources, the Depressed Classes faced significant economic vulnerabilities. Their lack of ownership or control over trades, businesses, services, or land rendered them financially fragile and dependent on the goodwill of others for sustenance.

However, it was the third form of strength, mental fortitude, where the Depressed Classes suffered most acutely. Over centuries of subjugation and servitude to the higher castes, they had internalized a sense of inferiority and resignation. Enduring insults and oppression without protest had eroded their spirit of resistance, leaving them devoid of confidence and ambition. In summary, Ambedkar observed that while the Depressed Classes possessed some degree of physical and financial resources, their greatest deficiency lay in the realm of mental strength, a deficit cultivated through generations of systemic discrimination and subjugation.⁵

Ambedkar raises a crucial question: "Why were they oppressed?" It is evident that their oppression stemmed from their lack of social strength. However, they were not alone in their minority status. Muslims, too, were a minority in many places, such as the Mahar-Mangs, who occupied only a few households in villages. Despite their small numbers, Muslims were protected from oppression by the awareness among Hindus that the entire Muslim population across India would come forward to support even a handful of Muslim households in a village. Consequently, caste Hindus were reluctant to antagonize them. These Muslim households enjoyed a relatively unfettered and fearless life, knowing that the broader Muslim community would come to their aid at the time of any Hindu aggression.

On the contrary, caste Hindus were convinced that no one would intervene to safeguard the lives of the Untouchables. They believed that no one would offer assistance, financial support would be lacking, and government officials would turn a blind eye to any social injustices perpetrated against them. Ambedkar delves deeper into the issue, posing a more critical inquiry: how can the Depressed Classes acquire the strength necessary to resist such oppression? For Ambedkar, this entails seeking external sources of strength to confront such tyranny. Consequently, he advocates for the Depressed Classes to forsake their current religious affiliations and integrate with another community.⁶

The fourth reason behind the necessity of conversion, according to Ambedkar, pertains to fostering unity among the Depressed Classes, who were fragmented across numerous castes and sub-castes. In his address to the Chamar community in Bombay in 1939, he unequivocally articulated that his mission of emancipation and upliftment was aimed at the entirety of the Depressed Classes, rather than any specific section. He emphasized his endeavour to eradicate the divisions entrenched within the Depressed Classes, earnestly advancing in that direction.⁷

During the conversion ceremony, Ambedkar pointed out that within the Buddhist religion, 75% of Bhikkhus were Brahmins, while 25% were from the Shudra caste and others. However, he highlighted the teachings of Lord Buddha, who proclaimed that his Bhikkhus hailed from diverse regions and castes. Drawing an analogy, Ambedkar likened the segregation of rivers flowing through valleys to the merging of rivers into the sea, where they lose their distinct identities and blend into a unified whole. In the Buddhist Sangh, this unity mirrors the vastness of the ocean, where everyone is considered equal and integral to the collective. Ambedkar further elaborated on this concept by likening the convergence of rivers into the ocean to the dissolution of caste distinctions upon joining the Buddhist Sangh. In this transformative process, individuals shed their caste affiliations and attain equality. He emphasized that Lord Buddha stood out as a remarkable figure who advocated for such profound egalitarianism.⁸

Fifth, conversion is essential because it helps to attain self-respect. In Ambedkar's view, self-respect was more earnest than the material progress of the Untouchables. Ambedkar declared that he was fighting for honour and self-respect during his conversion.⁹ In 1936, he explained to his community that their political rights should not impede their decision to convert. Some members of the Depressed Classes thought about what would happen to their political safeguards if they converted. However, he made it clear that they should not depend merely on political rights because these political safeguards were not granted on the condition that they would exist forever. Sooner or later, they were bound to be ceased, therefore, they would have to depend solely upon their social strength once their political safeguards cease. They should not hesitate even if political rights were required to be sacrificed for this purpose.¹⁰

In March 1956, he informed his community that reservations were not guaranteed indefinitely. Therefore, the Untouchables needed to rely on their own abilities and fortitude. They needed to become self-sufficient as soon as possible, as depending on reservations indefinitely would hinder their progress.¹¹

Monodeep offers two critical points that justify Ambedkar's point of view in the context of conversion. Firstly, there is nothing wrong with a religion which gives moral support and solace to the poor in times of crisis. Secondly, there was nothing wrong with those who embraced such a religion. It is simply wrong to prohibit the poor from embracing such a religion that might benefit them. The primary point in this discourse is that Ambedkar believed it was reasonable for the poor to take the initiative to join the neo-Buddhist religion rather than the rich as it would develop the minds of the poor. A bad religion based on inequality leaves a person with mental disorganisation. Cultivating a sound mind with the aid of a just religion allows the possibility for Dalits to flourish.¹²

Reasons of Conversion to Buddhism

The foremost question for us is why Ambedkar preferred Buddhism over other religions. What were the reasons and grounds upon which he ultimately chose Buddhism? In October 1954, while speaking on All India Radio, Ambedkar rejected the Hindu social philosophy presented in the Bhagwat Gita based on the Triguna philosophy. He believed this to be a deceptive distortion of Kapila's philosophy, which had resulted in the Caste System and the System of Graded Inequality being ingrained into Hindu Social Life. The trinity of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity can summarise Ambedkar's social philosophy. Ambedkar clarifies that the French Revolution did not influence his philosophy. Instead, it was rooted in religion and derived from the teachings of Buddha rather than political science.¹³

Here, it should be remembered that practically all major religions of the world are silent on the question of equality. Mohammed, Jesus and Buddha never really advised the masters to free their slaves. Even though Ambedkar did claim of taking his philosophy from Buddhism, but it should be remembered that equality and liberty are modern phenomena that did not exist before the French revolution. However, except in Hinduism, the concept of brotherhood has been inseparable from all major religions. In other words, the foundations of all religions, except Hinduism, have been based on fraternity. Two years later, speaking on the British Broadcasting Corporation (B.B.C.) in May 1956, Ambedkar said that he chose Buddhism because it was based on the three principles, which were not found in other religions worldwide. All other religions were based on the conception of God, the Soul and life after death. Buddhism taught Prajna (understanding against superstition and supernaturalism), Karuna(love), and Samata(equality). In Ambedkar's opinion, these three principles are necessary for building a worthy and satisfied life on Earth and also helpful to the world. In Ambedkar's view, neither God nor the Soul could save society.¹⁴

Ambedkar preferred Buddhism for three reasons; firstly, Buddhism was not alien to India. Secondly, the essential doctrine of Buddhism is social equality, which is needed for the Untouchable community. The third reason is that Buddhism is a rational religion which does not have a place for superstition.¹⁵

However, two other reasons led him to choose Buddhism. The primary reason for Ambedkar to choose Buddhism was its infallible character. He said bringing reforms in other religions was impossible because humans were related to God there. All these theist religions propounded that God had created Nature. God had created all the things of the world, such as the sky, air, moon and sun. The whole universe was the creation of God, and nothing much was left for humanity to do, so they must worship God. In Christianity, there is a conception of final judgement after death, and everything depends on it. On the contrary, God and the soul had little significance in Buddhism.¹⁶ Buddhism was such a non-dogmatic religion that Ambedkar could modify, change and transform according to the need, time and circumstances. Considering Buddhism's infallible and non-dogmatic character, Ambedkar laid the foundation of Navayana Buddhism, which may be traced in his book 'The Buddha and His Dhamma'. The second reason for Ambedkar to choose Buddhism was that it is non-theist. He said there was a place for God and Soul in Hinduism, but Hinduism lacked human dignity. According to him, there was no importance to human life in Hinduism.¹⁷

Edmund Weber believes that Ambedkar adopted Buddhism for political reasons instead of spiritual or theological quests. In Weber's view, the Indian National Congress was unsympathetic towards socio-religious reforms and did not sincerely try to change the living conditions of the Depressed Classes. According to him, Congress was prepared to give many concessions to the Muslims but refused to concede the demands of the Hindu Untouchables. Despite that, Ambedkar did not discard the indigenous idea of Dharma/Dhamma, or 'Hindu Culture'. According to Weber, the kind of Buddhism constructed by Ambedkar was an idealised picture projected mainly for political reasons, devoid of historical evidence. However, his new Buddhism was progressive, more or less atheistic, nationalist and liberal, and exhibited a scientific outlook. Therefore, Weber argues that Ambedkar's conversion was not so much a religious act but a social and political one.¹⁸

Similarly, Gary Tartakov suggests that neo-Buddhist goals are more material and psychological than metaphysical or spiritual. The choices within this religion are more rational and political. The visible effects of these goals are reflected in the politics of converts.¹⁹ Weber places a more convincing second argument that Ambedkar accepted Indian Buddhism because of its non-existence as a powerful community in India. Because Ambedkar could solve three problems by this, Weber argues; firstly, Ambedkar's attachment to Hindu Culture was evident, and under any circumstances, he did not wish to separate his community from the indigenous concept of Dharma. Therefore, Buddhism as a religious alternative was helpful in maintaining it. Secondly, there was no ritually pure Buddhist priesthood in India any more, with whom he could debate concerning his idealised Buddhism. In the case of conversion, he did not have to face any caste conflict with Buddhist Savarnas. Although Ambedkar interpreted Buddhism in his own way to cater to the needs of his community, he did not need to fear any religious conflict since a powerful and historical Buddhist orthodoxy did not exist in India.²⁰

However, there are some inconsistencies regarding the first argument placed by Weber that Ambedkar embraced Buddhism for political reasons, which requires further study of Ambedkar's interventions towards socio-religious reforms within Hinduism. Ambedkar's first social intervention was the Mahad Satyagraha, which he initiated to ensure the Untouchable community access to the public water source. His second intervention can be traced to the series of temple entry movements he led at different times. Ambedkar demanded equal participation in Hindu rituals. Ambedkar did not intend to seek political or financial gains from the Indian National Congress. Weber blamed Congress for its failure to bring significant improvements

to the lives of the Untouchable community. At the Yeola Conference in 1935, Ambedkar declared that it was a misfortune to be born Untouchable, but he would not die as a Hindu. Only at this conference Ambedkar showed his firm conviction that he had lost all hope for a possibility of reform within Hinduism, despite the fact that he did not leave any opportunity to make it possible.

Stan Lourdasamy, who has studied the role of religion in politics, argues that religions throughout history have justified and legitimised the status quo in favour of ruling classes. Historically, the ruling class oppressed people by justifying and legitimising their dominant position and dictatorial functioning in society through physical force and social subjugation.²¹ Initially, all religions were formed as part of some social intervention; it helped society to address the concerns created during the socio-political crisis to meet the new demands affecting that society.²² On the other hand, religion has also been a channel for social protest and social change for the masses against the dominant ideologies in society at every time and place in history.²³ Likewise, Ambedkar's Neo-Buddhism can also be added to the same strand of religious movements. Buddhism, which he had ultimately embraced, was unacceptable to him in its existing form. Therefore, it was modernised and reconstructed to meet the community's needs to which he was committed. In his view, social organisation can be changed by modifying religion and culture. He admits that machines and modern civilisation have brought many evils, but these evils can not be the justification against them. The responsibility for the lack of benefits from machines and modern civilisation reaching common people does not rest with the machines or civilisation themselves, but instead lies with the organisation of society. In such a situation, the social organisation has to be changed so that the benefits of all progress are not limited to a few.²⁴

Karunyakara argues that Ambedkar modernised Buddhism. In all modernisation processes, when the economy changes, society changes too. Nevertheless, religion and its values and beliefs must also be modified to complete this.²⁵ After Ambedkar, it was Dalai Lama XIV who modernised Buddhism. Ambedkar modernised Buddhism in the first half of the twentieth century, while Dalai Lama XIV did it in the second half of the century. Like Ambedkar, Dalai Lama intends to establish a democratic society based on Buddhist social ideals in independent Tibet.²⁶

Ambedkar and the Dalai Lama have made immense contributions to modernising Buddhism in their own way. However, both adopted different approaches due to their different cultural backgrounds. Ambedkar was born as an Untouchable in a Hindu society; being a lower caste, he experienced the oppression his community endured from the upper caste Hindus. His approach towards Buddhism was a reflection of his experience as an Untouchable. Ambedkar emphasised the ethical values in the social system of religion and differentiated Hinduism from other religions based on ethics. On the other hand, Dalai Lama XIV, born into a peasant family in Tibet, had spent most of his life in India. Chinese persecution of the Tibetan religious monarchy made him more realistic in his approach towards society and religion. Hence, his philosophy emphasises the concepts of non-violence and peaceful co-existence.²⁷ In addition, there is a significant difference of opinion between Ambedkar and Dalai Lama on a crucial matter. For Ambedkar, God is not an essential ingredient for a religion. In his opinion, God should not be integral to religion for a civilised society. However, Dalai Lama has not outrightly rejected the idea of God. He acknowledges that Buddhism is not a monotheistic religion that believes in one true God. However, he does not disagree with those who believe in one God or many Gods.²⁸

Conclusion

To summarise, it is imperative to revisit the earlier discourse regarding Ambedkar's choice to embrace Buddhism instead of Christianity or Islam. Monodeep argues that Ambedkar constructed Neo-Buddhism based on the Theravada tradition. However, the disappointment is that he justified it, saying it 'needed no visa for India' because Buddhism, unlike Christianity or Islam, was indigenous. This argument is flawed because Ambedkar should be aware that just as Buddhism was not originally from Japan, Hinduism was not indigenous to Surinam, Christianity was not native to England, and Islam was not originally from Turkey, these religions were still spread in those lands for the welfare of the people. Monodeep argues that Ambedkar adopted Buddhism because, in some way or other, he did not want his community to be detached from the Hindu culture.²⁹

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