



# Ambedkar's National Concern and Reasons Converting to Buddhism

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Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar meticulously investigated the intricacies of the Caste System for a duration exceeding 15 years, culminating in his assertion that Caste constitutes an intrinsic facet of Hindu society. He expounded upon this assertion, contending that occasional instances of 'inter-Caste dinners' or even 'inter-Caste marriages' are insufficient to eradicate the Caste System, as it fundamentally resides within the psyche of Hindus. Identifying Caste as a malady, Ambedkar attributed its origins to the teachings of Hinduism. He argued that the practice of casteism and the perpetuation of 'Untouchability' stem directly from the precepts of the Hindu faith in which adherents are immersed. Ambedkar posited that to envisage the annihilation of Caste while remaining within the fold of Hinduism is akin to believing that poison could transmute into nectar. In his view, embracing a different religious affiliation represents the sole viable path towards the eradication of Caste and 'Untouchability' from societal norms.<sup>1</sup>

He sarcastically stated that "it was really astonishing that the people who wanted to live in their own Caste, who died in their own Caste, and married in their own Caste, were fooling others with false slogans that they would break the Caste and if the 'Untouchables' did not believe them, they got infuriated with them."<sup>2</sup>

However, the question arises: why is the annihilation of Caste deemed unattainable within the framework of Hinduism? According to Ambedkar, the eradication of Caste faces insurmountable obstacles due to the prevalence of vertical inequality rather than mere horizontal inequalities among Castes. The hierarchical nature of inequality entrenched within the Caste structure serves as a formidable impediment to its abolition. Individuals find themselves ensnared within the rigid confines of the Caste System, yet not all are equally subjugated. Ambedkar elucidates that unlike the homogeneous status of slaves as posited by Karl Marx in his call for proletarian mobilization towards economic revolution, the diverse Castes within Hindu society possess distinct social and religious privileges and obligations, thereby rendering Marx's advocacy irrelevant in rallying Hindus against the Caste System.<sup>3</sup>

Ambedkar observed that caste is an integral part of Hinduism. He asserted that for Hindus, their religion ingrains the practice of casteism. If this observation is factually accurate, Hindus must recognize their real adversary: their religion, which perpetuates the caste system.<sup>4</sup>

In 1936, Ambedkar wondered for how long will Hindus admit that 'nothing is fixed, nothing eternal, nothing is 'Sanatan' and everything is changing, for change is the law of life for individuals as well as for society?' He asked how long will it be before Hindus realise that they must review the old values and revise their social ideals in a changing society?<sup>5</sup>

Ambedkar posits a transformation in the religious bedrock of Hindu society as imperative. He advocates for the recognition of the principles of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity within Hindu societal norms. To effectuate this transformation, the religious reverence accorded to Caste and Varna must be dismantled. Such sanctity can solely be eradicated through the repudiation of the divine authority vested in the Shastras.<sup>6</sup>

Ambedkar presents five propositions aimed at modernizing Hindu society:

1. Standardization of Religious Texts. Ambedkar advocates for the adoption of a single universally accepted religious text for all Hindus. He suggests the prohibition of other revered Hindu texts such as the Vedas, Shastras, and Puranas, with legal enforcement against preaching any doctrine derived from these texts.
2. Reform of Priesthood. Ambedkar proposes the abolition of priesthood within Hinduism, i.e. particularly , the eradication of hereditary priesthood. He advocates for opening priesthood to all Hindus interested in the role.

3. Requirement of Educational Credentials for Priests. Ambedkar argues that priests lacking recognized educational qualifications should be barred from conducting ceremonies. He suggests punitive measures for non-compliance once such regulations are implemented.
4. State Regulation and Democratization of Priesthood. Ambedkar emphasizes the need for state oversight and disciplinary action concerning the moral conduct of priests. He proposes limiting the number of priests according to state needs, akin to the regulation of government administrators. Additionally, he underscores the necessity of democratizing priesthood to counteract the entrenched hierarchies perpetuated by Brahminism and casteism.
5. Reevaluation of Religious Principles. Ambedkar calls for a critical reassessment of Hindu religious tenets. Hindus are urged to critically reassess their religious principles and realign them with the principles of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. This reevaluation need not entail the borrowing of principles from foreign ideologies; instead, Hindus could reconstruct their religious principles drawing from the patterns delineated in the Upanishads. Such a reformulation holds the potential for a comprehensive metamorphosis in their societal ethos and values, facilitating a profound transformation. However, an impediment emerges: the birth of a new life cannot occur within a deceased body; rejuvenation necessitates the cremation of the old form to make way for the emergence of the new. Consequently, to actualize this transformative vision, Hindus must relinquish the authority and dogma enshrined in the Shastras.<sup>7</sup>

Despite his reformation plan of Hinduism, Ambedkar believed that reformation of religion in general and Hinduism in particular was a difficult task. He said that in every country the 'Intellectual Class' is the most influential, and has a major role in devising the rules to govern the country. It is followed by the common masses and the destiny of a country depends upon its 'Intellectual Class'. If the 'Intellectual Class' is honest, independent and unbiased, it can guide the public at the time of crisis. But unfortunately, the Brahmin Caste is the only one in India in the name of 'Intellectual Class'. It has kept its interests above the interests of the country. The Brahmin Caste is honoured by the rest of the Hindus. Hindus have been taught that the Brahmins are 'Bhudevas' (Gods on earth), and therefore, they alone can be their teachers.<sup>8</sup>

Ambedkar further says, Brahmins are said to have been the pioneers of political and economic reforms. But they have never shown an interest in destroying the Caste System. Is there any hope that the Brahmins will lead a movement for the annihilation of the Caste System? Certainly not, according to Ambedkar. It may be argued that there are secular Brahmins, and the priestly Brahmins, and if the latter doesn't try to break the Caste System then the former may be expected to lead the movement. However, in this context, it should be borne in mind that abolition of the Caste System would adversely affect the Brahmin Caste. In such a situation is it reasonable to expect that the Brahmins will ever come to lead a movement which might destroy their power and prestige? Can the secular Brahmins be expected to raise the banner of protest against the priestly Brahmins, and lead a movement against the Caste System? Certainly not, According to Ambedkar. In Ambedkar's view, both, secular Brahmin and priestly Brahmin are the two branches of the one tree. Both belong to the same family. They are two arms of the same body and would not antagonize with each other's existence. Therefore, in Ambedkar's view, annihilation of Caste is an impossible task.<sup>9</sup>

Generally, it was the Hindu priestly class which did not want any reforms to be introduced in the religion. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar opined that a revolutionary cannot be a Pope, and a Pope does not want to be a revolutionary. He further argued that a Brahmin does not seek to be a revolutionary, and a revolutionary cannot be a Brahmin.<sup>10</sup>

In 1935, Ambedkar said that any Religion must be judged on the basis of its social standards and social ethics. According to him, the efficacy of any religion should be gauged by its contributions to societal welfare and the advancement of ethical norms. However, he contended that upon applying his rigorous criteria, virtually every established religion would fail and prove inadequate.<sup>11</sup>

It is clear that Ambedkar was not satisfied with the existing forms of religions, however, had he lost hope in religion itself? Certainly not. Ambedkar posited that a religious ideal exerts significant influence on individuals, transcending material considerations. It remains efficacious as long as there persists faith in its tenets. Thus, religion, functioning as a potent social force, commands attention and cannot be disregarded. "To ignore religion is to ignore a live wire" Ambedkar said.<sup>12</sup>

Here it should be borne in mind that by 1935, Ambedkar had recognised the power of religion. By 1940, Ambedkar agreed with Karl Marx that the philosophy's task was to transform the world, not merely to explain it.<sup>13</sup>

In 1935, he made it clear that 'religion is for man, not man for religion'.<sup>14</sup>

It may be asked if Ambedkar himself reconstructed religion in general, and Buddhism in particular? The answer will be in the affirmative. Ambedkar made extensive use of four books in reconstructing his philosophy of religion: W. Robertson Smith's 'The Religion of the Semites', Ernest Crowley's 'The Tree of Life', Charles Ellwood's 'The Reconstruction of Religion', and Emile Durkheim's, 'The elementary forms of religious life'. It should be borne in mind that these books were written for Western readers by Western authors addressing their own contemporary religious issues related to Christianity.<sup>15</sup>

Ambedkar developed his own criteria of judging religion and reconstructed Buddhism for his followers, but why did he not try to reconstruct Islam and Christianity? Like Buddhism, could Islam and Christianity not be reconstructed? What was his main concern? What was his fear? This question is important from two points. Firstly, In January 1936, he said that the 'Depressed Class' must not be delusional that conversion would resolve all their problems and place them on the pedestal of equality. He made it clear that under any new religion they would have to struggle to attain liberty and equality.

Secondly, while observing the caste practices among Indian Muslims, he discerned that they constituted solely a social phenomenon devoid of any religious sanction. These practices were not indigenous to their faith but rather emerged within the societal fabric. Conversely, for Hindus, the caste system held a revered status as an institution. Additionally, Ambedkar exhibited a nuanced understanding of Islamic principles, particularly those advocating for equality among its adherents. He articulated that the ethos of equality, as espoused by Christianity and Islam, transcended superficial attributes such as knowledge, wealth, or attire, which were merely outward manifestations of one's identity. Both these religions espoused a profound sense of humanity and enjoined upon their followers the imperative to uphold the dignity of all individuals, eschewing any form of discrimination or inequality.<sup>16</sup> On one occasion he wrote: "Although Islam was such a religion which had transcended the different races and colours and united diverse people into a compact brotherhood, yet Islam in India had not succeeded in uprooting caste feelings from among the Indian Musalmans".<sup>17</sup>

In my opinion, Ambedkar's fear of nationalism and his love for indigenous culture was reflected in 1936, when he disclosed his plan of conversion in the presence of Dr. Balakrishna Shivram Moonje, president of the Hindu Mahasabha.<sup>18</sup> It was stated in the 'Conversion Plan' that there were three faiths from among which the 'Depressed Class' could choose: Islam, Christianity and Sikhism. Islam possessed the capacity to provide the 'Depressed Class' with various resources essential for their upliftment. Financially, Islam had the boundless resources. Socially, Muslims were dispersed across India and could extend support to new converts, facilitating their integration into society. Politically, the 'Depressed Class' were entitled to the same rights enjoyed by Muslims. Converting to Islam did not entail the forfeiture of their political rights. They retained the right to special representation in Legislative Assemblies and access to government employment, akin to other Muslims.

Despite acknowledging these benefits, Ambedkar expressed apprehension regarding conversions to Islam or Christianity potentially leading to the denationalization of the 'Depressed Classes'. He warned that a surge in Muslim conversions might double the Muslim population, escalating the risk of Muslim dominance. Similarly, widespread adoption of Christianity could result in a Christian population of five to six crores, strengthening British control over the nation. Conversely, embracing Sikhism offered a different trajectory. By aligning with Sikhism, the 'Depressed Classes' could contribute positively to the nation's destiny without disrupting its social fabric. Such a choice would preserve their national identity.<sup>19</sup>

From a nationalist point of view, if Ambedkar had embraced Christianity or Islam, he would have had to face the hostility of Hindus. National integrity was a significant concern for Ambedkar and was repeatedly reflected in his writings. In his book, 'Pakistan and the Partition of India', Ambedkar wrote in 1940 that nationalism is an undeniable reality that cannot be dismissed or refuted. It is based on delusions and irrational instincts, and can disrupt empires. Quoting the historian Toynbee, Ambedkar said that nationalism is a strong force to produce wars. It is a vital force which must be recognised and has become a matter of life and death. It was not only true for Europe, but also India.<sup>20</sup>

Around 15 years later, Ambedkar's concern was again reflected in Burma in 1954. He advised the Buddhist council that the Sasana Council must not make the same mistakes the Christian Missionaries had committed in India. Initially, Christian Missionaries attempted to convert Brahmins in an effort to make it easier to convert other Hindus. However, this strategy ultimately proved unsuccessful. Christian Missionaries came to realise their error in attempting to convert Brahmins and redirected their focus towards the 'Untouchables'. However, by the time they realised their mistake, the picture had changed entirely. By the time they considered converting the Untouchables, the spirit of nationalism had firmly taken hold in India. Anything of foreign origin, including Christianity, faced hostility from the people. As a result, the Christian Missionaries could only convert a negligible number of Untouchables. Despite the Christian Missionaries' efforts, the

Christian population in India remains minimal. Had they directed their efforts towards converting the Untouchables and backward classes, they could have potentially converted a substantial portion of India's population.<sup>21</sup>

We shall finally review Ambedkar's decision of reconstructing Neo-Buddhism whose intention was to establish a just society by making 'Dhamma' morality sacred. For Ambedkar, social justice was primary and religion was secondary. In his view, social justice is the ultimate end and religion could be the means to achieve that end. But the question should be why Ambedkar redesigned Buddhism rather than other religions? What was his main concern and fear?

Monodeep argues that Ambedkar adopted Buddhism because he did not want his community to be detached from Hindu culture. Therefore, the impact and pressure of the Hindu thinkers and politicians in those days upon him can easily be visualised.<sup>22</sup> In contrast to Monodeep's view, N. K. Singh argued that Ambedkar did not seriously consider Islam at any point. One plausible explanation could be that opting for Islam during a period marked by heightened Hindu-Muslim communal tensions would have intensified hostility toward Ambedkar and his community from Hindus. Conversely, Ambedkar recognized that choosing Buddhism as their religious affiliation would encounter minimal opposition from the Hindu majority.<sup>23</sup>

In this context, it needs to be clarified that Ambedkar was not a person who could be pressured to change his decision. No doubt, he was in touch with the leaders of Hindu Mahasabha and (RSS) Rashtriya SwayamSevak Sangh, but his understanding of religion and his ideology was based and shaped on 20 years of deep study of various living religions of the world. I agree with N.K. Singh that by adopting Buddhism, Ambedkar could have avoided the opposition of the majority of the Hindus. Apart from nationalist feeling, 'indigenous culture' was more important to him. In his blueprint (Buddha and future of his religion), Ambedkar asserted that 'religion forms a crucial part of one's social inheritance, intertwined with one's life, dignity, and pride'. It is not easy task of relinquishing one's religious beliefs.<sup>24</sup>

As far as Indian culture is concerned, I think that Ambedkar had not rejected Hinduism completely. His rejection of the Caste System in its entirety was clear. However, he had never attempted to discard the utility of Hindu mythology, art and architecture, symbols, languages and attire. In 1936, he said that he had endorsed the proposal of conversion to Sikhism because he felt that "he had some responsibility towards the future of Hindu culture and civilisation".<sup>25</sup>

In addition to Buddhism, Ambedkar seriously considered Sikhism as an alternative religion to recommend to his followers, however, the leaders of the Akali Dal, a Sikh political party, opposed the assimilation of millions of Mahars into the Sikh community, fearing that it might shift the political balance in an unfavorable direction. Sardar Sujan Singh instructed Master Tara Singh to persuade Dr. B.R. Ambedkar to reconsider his plan to convert to Sikhism.<sup>26</sup>

Last but not least, it needs to be told that undoubtedly, Ambedkar was a nationalist and recognised its potent force. However, he was not an ultra nationalist, nor did he intend to raise the banner of Hinduism, or denigrate Islam and Christianity. In my opinion, Ambedkar did not embrace Islam or Christianity due to the fear that if the Depressed Classes would adopt 'foreign' religions, they might be projected as anti-nationalist elements, and killed by the extremist forces of the country. His fear was reflected in his book 'Pakistan and Partition of India', in which he wrote that nationality constitutes a social sentiment, engendering a collective sense of unity and fostering a perception of belongingness akin to that of a familial bond among individuals. However, this sentiment operates as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it cultivates a sense of solidarity within one's own community, thereby mitigating economic and social disparities. Yet, concurrently, it instigates a sense of alienation towards those outside one's community.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Emancipation, p 134.

<sup>3</sup> Ambedkar Dr. B.R., 'Annihilation of Caste', edited, *Writings and Speeches*, Vol One, Ambedkar Foundation, New Delhi, 2014, (Hereafter Annihilation of Caste), p 72

<sup>4</sup> Annihilation of Caste, pp 68-69

<sup>5</sup> Annihilation of Caste, pp 79-80

<sup>6</sup> Annihilation of Caste, pp 86-87

<sup>7</sup> Annihilation of Caste, pp 76-78

<sup>8</sup> Annihilation of Caste, p 71

<sup>9</sup> Annihilation of Caste, pp 69-70

<sup>10</sup> Annihilation of Caste, pp 70-71

<sup>11</sup> Annihilation of Caste, pp 94-96

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<sup>17</sup> Teltumbde Anand, *Ambedkar on Muslims*, Vikas Adhyayan Kendra, Mumbai, 2003, Ambedkar On Muslims, p 67

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<sup>19</sup> HSDC, p 241

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<sup>22</sup> Monodeep, pp 251-252

<sup>23</sup> Singh N.K. Dr., 'AMBEDKAR'S INTERPRETATION OF RELIGIONS: DALIT POINT OF VIEW', *Global Religious Vision*, Vol. 3/IV, JSTOR, April 2003, (Hereafter N.K. Sing), pp 251-252

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<sup>25</sup> Ambedkar Dr. B.R., 'Conversion Movement Sans Selfish Motive', edited, *Writings and Speeches*, Vol 17 Part One, p 252

<sup>26</sup> Monodeep, pp 194-195

<sup>27</sup> RPPI, p 31