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Ambedkar and The Dalit Buddhist Movement in India (1950-2000)

Dr. Shaji. A
Faculty Member, Department of History
School of Distance Education
University of Kerala, Palayam, Thiruvananthapuram

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was one of the most remarkable men of his time, and the story of his life is the story of his exceptional talent and outstanding force of character which helped him to succeed in overcoming some of the most formidable obstacles that an unjust and oppressive society has ever placed in the way of an individual. His contribution to the cause of Dalits has undoubtedly been the most significant event in 20th century India. Ambedkar was a man whose genius extended over diverse issues of human affairs. Born to Mahar parents, he would have been one of the many untouchables of his times, condemned to a life of suffering and misery, had he not doggedly overcome the oppressive circumstances of his birth to rise to pre-eminence in India's public life. The centre of life of Ambedkar was his devotion to the liberation of the backward classes and he struggled to find a satisfactory ideological expression for that liberation. He won the confidence of the- untouchables and became their supreme leader. To mobilise his followers he established organisations such as the ***Bahishkrit Hitkarni Sabha, Independent Labour Party*** and ***later All India Scheduled Caste Federation***. He led a number of temple-entry Satyagrahas, organized the untouchables, established many educational institutions and propagated his views through newspapers like the '***Mooknayak***', '***Bahishkrit Bharat***' and '***Janata***'. He participated in the Round Table Conference in order to protect the interests of the untouchables. He became the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly and played a very important role in framing the Indian Constitution. He was also the Law Minister of India up to 1951. Right from 1935, Ambedkar was thinking of renouncing Hinduism. Finally, in 1956 he adopted Buddhism and appealed to his followers to do the same.

Conversion as a means of escaping the caste system had already been tried by many untouchables in India. But Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism had heralded a new era of revolutionary socio-religious changes in India. His conversion to Buddhism was his modernist project to redefine the character of India as a secular nation-state. After publishing a series of books and articles arguing that Buddhism was the only way for the Untouchables to gain equality, Ambedkar publicly converted to Buddhism on October 14, 1956 at Deekshabhoomi, Nagpur. He took the three refuges and the five precepts from a Buddhist monk, Bhadant U Chandramani, in the traditional manner and then in his turn administered them to the 380,000 of his followers that were present.[1] If many religious conversions in India took place due to the evangelical activities of the Christian missionaries or through forceful acts, Ambadkar's attempt was for a wider objective ie, to attain equality.

As early as in 1927, Ambedkar expressed his intension to leave Hinduism and embrace another religion. In the Mahad Conference held in 1927 he said, "*We want equal rights in society. We will achieve them as far as possible while remaining within the Hindu fold or, if necessary by kicking away this worthless Hindu identity. And if it becomes necessary to give up Hinduism it would no longer be necessary for us to bother about temples*"[2] But Ambedkar employed conversion as a political strategy only after 1930. In the spring of 1933 before participating in the third Round Table Conference at James Palace London, Ambedkar once again expressed his intension to leave Hinduism. By this time he hinted his willingness to embrace Buddhism. On May 30 1935 Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar had convened a two-day conference at Yeola (Nasik) to ponder over the declaration of conversion, which he had made. He declared that he would not die a Hindu, saying that it perpetuates caste injustices. In his Speech he had stated, "*Wherever you may go, your political rights and safeguards will accompany you. I have no doubt about it. If you become Muslims, you will get the political rights as Muslims. If you become Christians, you will get your political rights as Christians, if you become Sikhs, you will have your political safeguards as Sikhs and political rights are based on population. The political safeguards of any society will increase with the increase of its population*." He even went to the extent of advising his brethren that it was not proper to depend solely on political rights. Similarly in the concluding part of that speech he hinted his followers for embracing the Buddhism.

Ambedkar was approached by various leaders of different denominations and faiths. Meetings were held to discuss the question of Dalit religion and the pros and cons of conversion. On May 22, 1936, an "All Religious Conference" was held at Lucknow. It was attended by prominent Dalit leaders including Jagjivan Ram, though Ambedkar could not attend it. At the conference, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, and Buddhist representatives presented the tenets of their respective religions in an effort to win over Dalits. Buddhist monk Lokanatha visited Ambedkar's residence at Dadar on June 10, 1936 and tried to persuade him to embrace Buddhism. Later in an interview to the Press, Lokanatha said that Ambedkar was impressed with Buddhism and that his own ambition was to convert all Dalits to Buddhism. In 1937, Lokanatha published a pamphlet *Buddhism Will Make You Free*, dedicated to the "Depressed Classes" of India from his press in Ceylon. In early 1940s, Ambedkar visited Acharya Ishvardatt Medharthi's Buddhpuri School in Kanpur. Medharthi had earlier been initiated into Buddhism by Lokanatha, and by the mid-1940s, he had close contacts with Ambedkar. For a short while, Ambedkar also took Pali classes from Medharthi in Delhi. In the Yeola conference he said, "*The disabilities we have suffered and the indignities we had to put up with, were the result of our being the members of the Hindu community. Will it not be better for us to leave that fold and ambrace a new faith that would give us equal status, a secure position and rightful treatment? I advise you to severe your connection with Hinduism and to embrace any other religion. But in doing so, be careful in choosing the new faith and see that equality of treatment, status and opportunity will be guaranteed to you unreservedly. Unfortunately I was born a Hindu untouchable. It was beyond my power to prevent that, but I declare that it is within my power to refuse to live under ignoble and humiliating condition. I solemnly assure you that I will not die a Hindu*." [3]

Ever since the 1935 Depressed Classes Conference, when he had shocked Hindu India with the declaration that though he had been born a Hindu he did not intend to die one, Ambedkar had been giving earnest consideration to the question of conversion. Further consideration made him increasingly convinced that there was no future for the Untouchables within Hinduism, that they would have to adopt another religion, and that the best religion for them to adopt was Buddhism. Some scholars think that John Dewey, the American philosopher who was his teacher, influenced him. In 1950 he visited Sri Lanka at the invitation of the Young Men's Buddhist Association, Colombo, where he addressed a meeting of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Kandy and appealed to the Untouchables of Sri Lanka to embrace Buddhism. In 1951, he wrote an article defending the Buddha against the charge that he had been responsible for the decrease in women's status in ancient India. The same year, he compiled the Bauddha Upasana Patha, a small collection of Buddhist devotional texts. In 1955, he founded the Bharatiya Bauddha Mahasabha or Buddhist Society of India. Addressing the thousands of Untouchables who had assembled for the occasion, he declared that henceforth he would devote himself to the propagation of Buddhism in India. He also announced that he was writing a book, '*The Buddha and His Dhamma'*, explaining the tenets of Buddhism in simple language for the benefit of the common man. [4]

After the Yeola Conference and the Depressed Class Conference, the next major step taken by Ambedkar towards his conversion activity was the conference held at Bombay on 31 may 1936. This was a meeting convened by him to gain support for the conversion. He mainly aimed at the conversion of the mahar caste. As a profound lifelong student of anthropology Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar made a remarkable discovery that the Mahar people are originally ancient Buddhist people of India. They have been forced outside a village to live like an outcast as they refused to leave Buddhist practices and eventually they were made into untouchables. He wrote a scholarly book on this topic- *Who Were Sudras?* How they became Untouchables. Ambedkar declared in Bombay, "*Our aim is to gain freedom. We are not interested in anything else at the moment. If we can gain freedom from the conversion, why should we shoulder the responsibility of the reform of Hindu religion? And why should we waste our energy, time, labour and money on that? Let there be no misunderstanding that the object of our struggle is our liberation from Hinduism and not reform of Hinduism. The aim of our movement is to achieve freedom, social, economic and religious for the untouchables. So far as untouchables are concerned this freedom cannot be achieved except through conversion*."[5]

After meetings with the Sri Lankan Buddhist monk Hammalawa Saddhatissa, Ambedkar organised a formal public ceremony for himself and his supporters in Nagpur on October 14, 1956. Accepting the Three Refuges and Five Precepts from a Buddhist monk in the traditional manner, Ambedkar completed his own conversion. He then proceeded to convert a large number (some 500,000) of his supporters who were gathered around him. He prescribed the 22 Vows for these converts, after the Three Jewels and Five Precepts.[6] He then traveled to Kathmandu in Nepal to attend the Fourth World Buddhist Conference. His work on *The Buddha or Karl Marx* and "*Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India*" remained incomplete. Unfortunately Ambedkar died on 6 December 1956. Although Ambedkar had been a Buddhist for only seven weeks, during that period he probably did more for the promotion of Buddhism than any other Indian since Ashoka. At the time of his death three quarters of a million Untouchables had become Buddhists, and in the months that followed hundreds of thousands more took the same step-despite the uncertainty and confusion that had been created by the sudden loss of their leader. His conversion to Buddhism shook India and gave an enormous sense

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of pride to the Dalits. It also strengthened the liberals among caste Hindus who were ashamed of the practice of untouchability in India and oppressions of the Dalits. The socialist and the communist trends in India were also strengthened.

Dr. Ambedkar's role as a prominent constitution maker of India is quite well known. However, his views on religion, particularly his reasons for renouncing Hinduism, the religion of his birth, are not as widely known. Ambedkar who was born in an "untouchable" family carried on a relentless battle against untouchability throughout his adult life. In the last part of his life, he renounced Hinduism and became a Buddhist. A detailed answer to the question of his conversion can be obtained by studying his The Buddha and His Dhamma, Annihilation of Caste, Philosophy of Hinduism, Riddles in Hinduism etc. Nonetheless, some of his articles, speeches and interviews before and after his conversion to Buddhism throw some light on this question. Before Ambedkar's conversion, the question of caste was understood as an internal affair of Hinduism and its solution was imagined to be largely restricted within the boundaries of Hindu social reforms as proposed by Gandhi.[7] Against such an imagination, Dr. Ambedkar took a radical stance by proposing two varied alternatives for social transformation. Firstly he proposed a constitutional state based on the universal values of social justice, liberty and equality. The second was of conversion to Buddhism which was his modernist project to redefine the character of India as a secular nation-state. However, many took his call for conversion with skepticism, as they were not aware of the necessity of a new religion for the Dalits in a modern nation-state.

It was the firm belief of Babasaheb Ambedkar that the social revolution in India is possible only by the annihilation of caste and discarding the social disorder based on mythical Brahmanical superiority. He believed that the caste system based on graded social hierarchy is the backbone of Hinduism. He therefore wanted to denounce the Hinduism. He made an in depth study of different religions before making a decision to embrace the Buddhism. Ambedkar said, "*I thought for long that we could rid the Hindu society of its evils and get the depressed classes incorporated into it on terms of equality. That motive inspired the Mahad Chaudar Tank satyagraha and the Nasik temple entry satyagraha. With that object in mind we burned the Manu smriti and performed mass thread ceremonies. Experience has taught me better. I stand today absolutely convinced that for the depressed classes there can be no equality among the Hindus because on inequality rest the foundations of Hinduism. We no longer want to be part of the Hindu society.*" [8] Ambedkar was dead against untouchability practiced by the Hindus. He never hesitated in saying, "*Untouchability, is a kind of disease of the Hindus. It is a mental twist. I do not know how my friend is going to untwist the twist which the Hindus have got for thousands of years unless they are all sent to some kind of hospital.*" [9] For Dr. Ambedkar, nothing in his long, distinguished career could convince him that the socio-cultural dynamics of Hinduism would ever offer Dalits a way out of "untouchability," disenfranchisement, poverty and social stigma.

Ambedkar firmly believed that there was no possibility of salvation for the untouchables so long as they remained in the Hindu fold. He was not against the annihilation of religion because to him religion was a source of power. He argued that "*religion is necessary for people in distress. The poor man lives on hope. The source of life is hope. If the hope of life is destroyed how will life go on?* [10] According to Ambedkar "*Religion must be mainly a matter of principles only. It cannot be a matter of rules. The moment it degenerates into rules, it ceases to be a religion, as it kills responsibility which is an essence of the true religious act.*" [11] According to him Hinduism is a religion of rules, a compendium of ritual regulations which are based on caste ideology of hierarchy and untouchability. He was very particular to the point that political and constitutional reform cannot succeed unless it is preceded by social reform aimed at the eradication of untouchabilty. To him caste cannot be reformed and only annihilated. The annihilation of caste implies the abolition of Hindu ideology particularly as it was formulated in the sastras and smritis. Caste is fundamentally a state of mind which is systematized in these scriptures. It must be recognized that Hindus observed caste not because they are deeply religious. Ambedkar exhorted to his followers that the enemy that they must grapple with is not the people who observe caste, but the sastras that teach them the religion of caste. [12] In the opinion of Ambedkar the Hindu religious belief that "All human beings are not born equal "creates caste-based discrimination against the Dalits that leads to various forms of violence against them including public humiliation, torture, rape, beating and killing. He said, "A people and their religion must be judged by social standards based on social ethics. No other standard would have any meaning if religion is held to be necessary good for the well being of the people"[13]

Ambedkar felt that Hindu religion has been taken over by the Upper Class people. Their centuries old domination and discrimination polluted their minds and acts. No dignified life is possible for the people who live in the lower strata of the social order. Hence he advocated the right of choosing one's religion where one feels that dignified life is possible and human values are respected. He wished to replace the religion of principles with a religion of principles which will be the basis for civil government. According to him the new religion must uphold the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity and he identified Buddhism as the true

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religion. Ambedkar pointed out that caste had made Hindu society stagnant. Due to this system, Hindu society is unable to accommodate outsiders. This drawback poses permanent problems for integration. Even internally, the Hindu society fails to satisfy the test of a homogeneous society. It is only a conglomeration of different castes. Caste is an obstacle in the growth of national spirit and it perpetrates injustice on the lower castes. This has resulted in moral degradation and demoralisation of the lower castes. The caste system has dehumanized them thoroughly. Therefore according to Ambedkar the battle for the removal of untouchability becomes the battle for human rights and justice.

Ambedkar disagreed with the suggestion that caste stratification arose through racial, colour or occupational factors. According to him caste inequalities were social and not racial origin. Unlike the leaders of all other untouchable movements, he refused to claim that untouchables were adi dravida or adi-dharmas. He stressed that they were the same racial background as other Indians. Since the position of untouchables in the society was not racial but social it is amenable to change. He emphasized the destruction of caste as a prerequisite to economic equality and socialism. In fact, he argued that in the Indian society, we find a mixture of various races. There fore, the idea that the untouchables belonged to some inferior or defeated race was untenable. Ambedkar argued that to meet the challenge of Buddhism, Brahminism adopted complete non-violence, total renunciation of meat-eating and deification of the cow. In order to create self-respect among the lower castes and untouchables he tried to convince them that there is nothing shameful in their past, nothing inferior or inglorious in their heritage. To him their low status was not due to any disability on their part, but it was a result of social mechanism under the influence of Brahminism. Ambedkar argued that every Hindu is a slave of the Vedas and Shastras. He exhorted his men that in place of the unjust principle of hereditary hierarchy they must strive to establish the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity. He believed that the Dalit people would never achieve liberation, or even basic human rights, within Hinduism. Ambedkar became an arch critic of Hinduism when he characterized that religion thus, "*the religion which discriminates between its two followers is discriminatory and the religion which treats crores of its followers worse than dogs and criminals and adopts oppressive policy against them cannot be religion at least*." [14] His wrath against the attitude of caste Hindus is clear when he said, "The Hindus wanted the Vedas and they sent for Vyasa, who was not a caste Hindu. The Hindus wanted an Epic and they sent for Valmiki, who was an Untouchable. The Hindus wanted a Constitution, and they sent for me." [15]

Ambedkar argued that Buddhism was the least obscurantist religion. It appreciated the spirit of equality and liberty. Removal of injustice and exploitation was the goal of Buddhism. By adopting Buddhism, the untouchables would be able to carve out a new identity for themselves. Since Hinduism gave them nothing but sufferings, by renouncing Hinduism, the untouchables would be renouncing the stigma of untouchability and bondage attached to them. In the Yeola conference Ambedkar argued that he prefered Buddhism because it gives three principles in combination, which no other religion does. Buddhism teaches prajna (understanding as against superstition and supernaturalism), karuna (love), and samata (equality). This is what man wants for a good and happy life. Neither god nor soul can save society. He also pointed out that Hinduism believes in God. Buddhism has no God. Hinduism believes in soul. According to Buddhism, there is no soul. Hinduism believes in Chaturvarnya and the caste system. Buddhism has no place for the caste system and Chaturvarnya. Ambedkar was not attracted by the philosophical and mystical basis of Buddhism which closely resembled Hinduism. But he was attracted to the moral philosophy, concept of equality, justice and humanism. Ambedkar attempted to present traditional Indian Buddhism as fully consistent with materialism, with scientific rationality, with parliamentary democracy and with the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity. To do this he asserted that Buddhism has no place for belief in the supernatural, that the doctrine of Karma is a theory of causation only, that prjna(wisdom) means the ability to think rationally and without superstition, that karuna(compassion) means the ability to love one's fellow men and to work for social justice; that the Bikshu(monk) is not merely an ascetic on his own enlightenment but a social worker dedicated to the betterment of human welfare. [16]

Ambedkar asserted that Buddha's renunciation is motivated more by political exigencies rather than a desire finds the ultimate truth. Through Buddhism, Dr. Ambedkar proposed an alternative which was indigenously rooted and had the potential to support the modern liberal ethos of the new nation-state. He argued that Buddhism is not a religion but a social philosophy, which encompasses radical challenges to the social system based on caste hierarchies. He argued that "*The greatest thing that the Buddha has done is to tell the world that it can not be reformed except by the reformation of the mind of man, and the mind of the world*."Ambedkar compared Buddhism with other religions and realized it as the best for the Dalits to follow because it offered a highly rational blend of individualism with socio-political commitment, which he intended to be the basis of a new social order. Through conversion Ambedkar wished a silent revolution to transform the traditional inertia of untouchability into a politically conscious movement cutting across caste lines. Through

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this act he further dreamt a social change because he believed that the emergence of politically conscious classes might act as an agent for fundamental change in Indian society.

The Buddhist movement was somewhat hindered by Dr. Ambedkar's death so shortly after his conversion. It did not receive the immediate mass support from the Untouchable population that Ambedkar had hoped for. According to the 2001 census, there are currently 7.95 million Buddhists in India, at least 5.83 million of whom are Buddhists in Maharashtra. This makes Buddhism the fifth-largest religion in India and 6% of the population of Maharashtra. The Buddhist revival remains concentrated in two states: Ambedkar's native Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh. The Dalit Buddhist movement in Kanpur gained impetus with the arrival of Dipankar, a Chamar bhikkhu, in 1980. In 2002, Kanshi Ram, a popular out-caste political leader from a Sikh religious background, announced his intention to convert to Buddhism on October 14, 2006, the fiftieth anniversary of Ambedkar's conversion along with his followers. Since Ambedkar's conversion, several thousand people from different castes have converted to Buddhism in ceremonies including the twenty-two vows. The Tamil Nadu and Gujarat governments passed new laws in 2003 to ban "forced" religious conversions. These laws were later withdrawn due to heavy opposition. There are scattered survivors of the period when Buddhism flourished in India such as the Baruas of Assam, Chakmas of Bengal, the Saraks of Orissa and the Himalayan Buddhists of North-East India. Buddhist communities are found in Madya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Andra Pradesh. In Maharashtra, the conversion movement has been largely confined to the Mahar subcaste, to which Dr Ambedkar himself belonged. Now it is spreading to other Maharashtrian communities. Till the 80s, Buddhism was for the educated Dalit(s) in Kanpur an individual quest. It became a mass movement when it was linked with assertive Dalit politics, first by the Dalit Panthers in the 1980s and through the BSP and Mayawati's short but poignant rule in U.P in the 1990s.

Buddhist Dalits are militantants and at some places they have organisd the poor dalits. Despite the intent of the ideology to actualize equality and community among all dalits, the conversion has so far not led to new relations promoting emotional ties of equality among various strata of Dalits. Buddhism in India remained not simply 'Dalit' institutions, but institutions limited to specific *jatis* among Dalits. The 'post-Ambedkar Dalit movement' was ironically only that in the end—a movement of Dalits, challenging some of the deepest aspects of oppression and exploitation, but failing to show the way to transformation. The Buddhist movement of the Dalits made only half-hearted efforts to destroy caste; it has attempted and achieved some real though limited societal changes, with gains especially for the educated sections among Dalits, but it has failed to transform the society sufficiently to raise the general mass out of what is still among the most excruciating poverty in the world. Though this movement has carried forward the challenge of empowerment and brought anti-caste issues into the political agenda, it still seems unable to become a decisive political force, leaving Dalits and other suppressed caste groups forced to bargain for concessions with the dominant political parties it characterizes as *'Manuwadi'*, dominated by upper castes and the ideologies of Brahmanic Hinduism. The day promised by the 'new sun' seems still far away. The contemporary Dalit politics employs caste only as an identity to fight against the authoritative brahminical hegemony. It has forgotten the legacy and suitability of the Buddhist conversion movement in fighting this battle. This politics of caste appears to be only a power struggle between competing castes. Making caste identity as the main instrument of mobilization, it actually endorses the brahminical ideology in regulating the democratic system.

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[6.] . www.wikipaedia free encyclopedia, visited on 22 March 2011; The Dalit Buddhist movement (dubbed as Navayana by certain Ambedkerites) is arguably the most influential of a series of 19th and 20th century Buddhist revival movements in India. It received its most substantial impetus from B. R. Ambedkar's call for the conversion of Dalits to Buddhism in the context of a caste based society that considered them to be at the lowest end of the hierarchy. In 1890, Pandit C. Ayodhya Dasa (1845-1914), better known as Iyothee Thass, founded the Sakya Buddhist Society (also known as the Indian Buddhist Association). The first president of the Indian Buddhist Association was the German born American Paul Carus, the author of *The Gospel of Buddha* (1894). Thass, a Tamil Siddha physician, was the pioneer of the Tamil Dalit movement. He argued that Tamil Dalits were originally Buddhists. He led a delegation of prominent Dalits to Henry Steel Olcott and asked for his help in the reestablishment of "Tamil Buddhism." Olcott helped Thass to visit Sri Lanka, where he received *diksha* from Bhikkhu Sumangala Nayake. After returning to India, Thass established the *Sakya Buddhist Society* in Madras with branches in many places including Karnataka. Thass established a weekly magazine called *Oru Paisa Tamizhan* ("One Paisa Tamilian") in Chennai in 1907, which served as a newsletter linking all the new branches of the Sakya Buddhist Society. The magazine discussed traditions and practices of Tamil Buddhism, new developments in the Buddhist world, and the Indian subcontinent's history from the Buddhist point of view. Bhagya Reddy Verma (Madari Bagaiah), a Dalit leader of Andhra Pradesh, was also fascinated by Buddhism and promoted its adoption among the Dalits. In the early 20th century, the Barua Buddhists of Bengal under the leadership of Kripasaran Mahasthavir (1865-1926), founder of the Bengal Buddhist Association in Calcutta (1892), established viharas in cities such as Lucknow, Hyderabad, Shillong and Jamshedpur. Acharya Ishvardatt Medharthi (1900-1971) of Kanpur also supported the cause of the Dalits. He had studied Pali at Gurukul Kangri and Buddhist scripture was well known to him. He was initiated into Buddhism by Gyan Keto and the Lokanatha in 1937. Gyan Keto (1906-1984), born Peter Schoenfeldt was a German who arrived to Ceylon in 1936 and became a Buddhist. Although Medharthi heavily criticized the Indian caste system, he didn't criticize Hinduism. He claimed that the Dalits ("Adi Hindus") were the ancient rulers of India and had been trapped into slavery by the Aryan invaders. He also claimed that the sanatana dharma was the religion of "Adi Hindus", and tried to reconcile Buddhism with the Sant Mat.

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