

# **LIBERATION AND IDENTITY FORMATION OF BUDDHIST CONVERTS**

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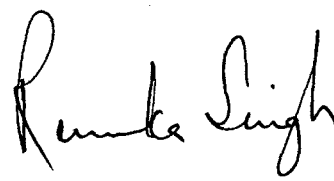
**CERTIFICATE**

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled "**LIBERATION AND IDENTITY FORMATION OF BUDDHIST CONVERTS**", submitted by me in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY** is an original work and has not been previously submitted, in part or full, for the award of any other degree of this or any other University.

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We recommend that the dissertation may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

  
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# **Introduction**

In recent years there has been an increasing scholarly recognition of the importance of religious conversion movements as a result of change and various processes occurring in India. The growth of a rich diversity of religious traditions of Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, as well as the spread of Islam and Christianity, has all been to a considerable extent the result of some kind of conversion process.

The emergence of these new forms of religious identity, involving different ways of understanding the individual, community and the cosmic order have been closely linked with the development of new types of ethical and social behaviors. Most of these movements involved the development of new forms of social organization, while the new adherents invariably developed their own distinctive forms of culture, historical consciousness and attitudes to a range of general issues. Although the main focus of this work is on the phenomenon of Buddhist conversion (by Dalits) in India since 1956, it is also an attempt to identify, raise and explore many of the central concepts and issues associated with conversion movements in general.

## **The Concept of Conversion**

One of the major problems has always been the question of definition. What is conversion and what are conversion movements? At the simplest and popular level most commentators seem to be referring to some sort of change in religious belief and/ or affiliation, a change which is often thought of as communal and which is expressed symbolically through the performance of

rituals. In India as in other parts of the world, 'conversion' in the social sense of a change in communal affiliation is, in fact, usually marked by some sort of ritual. For Christians it might be the act of baptism, for Muslims and Buddhist a very simple statement or confession of faith. But whatever the case, there are usually special rituals of admission which underline social and corporate nature of the process involved.

The frequency, with which the term 'conversion' is used to describe the changes of fellowship, has probably been encouraged by the fact that it links the idea of conversion with some kind of observable phenomenon. It is easy for scholars and other observers to talk about the 'shifting of camps' and the way in which people either 'opted out of and joined' or simply 'joined' a new religious community. Converts, missionaries and others have often highlighted the moment of admission to membership of the community, while scholars continue to scrutinize membership list, tables of the number of adherents and census data in order to find something tangible which will provide evidence of change and trends in religious development. And yet one may ask whether this is evidence of 'conversion', and what all this data on changes in communal affiliation really means?

In his work, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, Lewis Rambo places his emphasis not so much on change of fellowship but on an inner and radical religious transformation. He points out that the word 'conversion' which can be translated as 'a turning' is of Jewish and Christian origin, that its precise meaning is disputed even among Christians and he argues that, in the last

analysis, conversion is 'what a faith group says it is'<sup>1</sup>. In his own definition he makes allowance for a wide range of different types of experience in different contexts and cultures:

*Conversion is a process of religious change that takes place in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies institutions, expectations, and orientations... (a) Conversion is a process over time, not a single event; (b) conversion is contextual and thereby influences and is influenced by a matrix of relationships, expectations, and situations; and (c) factors in conversion process are multiple, interactive, and cumulative. There is no one cause of conversion, no one process and no one simple consequence of that process.*<sup>2</sup>

## **Conversions in Global Perspective**

One of the most influential exponents of conversion as transition in belief is Robin Horton who writes about African religion and also explored the relationship between social change and developments in African cosmology.<sup>3</sup> According to Horton, traditional African religions incorporate a belief in a two-tiered structure, 'the first tier being that of the lesser spirits and the second that of the Supreme Being'. The lesser spirits he suggests, 'underpin events and processes in the microcosm of the local community and its environment, while the Supreme Being underpins events and processes in the macrocosm, i.e., in the world as a whole'. The world of the lesser spirits was especially appropriate in communities which were comparatively isolated and dominated

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis R Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, New Heaven, 1993. p.xiv

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.5

<sup>3</sup> See especially "African Conversion", *Africa*. Vol.xlv, No.2, April 1971 and "On the Rationality of Conversion", Part .1. *Africa*; Vol.45, No.3, 1975.

by subsistence farming. However, as the communities became increasingly exposed to the wider world and as communications improved so people gradually began to feel the need for more satisfactory systems of explanation. The attention paid to the lesser spirits slowly shifted to a focus on the character and cult of the supreme being towards a cosmology which appeared to be more meaningful and appropriate in the macrocosm. Notions of a supreme being were, however, more highly developed in Christianity and Islam than in African religions, with the result that these exogenous movements seemed to offer a world view (including a system of conduct) which would better equip the African villager to cope with the problems of the wider world.

### **Conversions in India: A Comparative Perspective**

Horton's specific model of conversion can hardly be applied in any great detail to the process of conversion from 'Hinduism'. Apart from the question about the role of caste, economic and other non-ideational factors in prompting Indian conversion, there is also the problem of basic difference between the so-called 'Hindu' and African cosmology. Unlike the African cosmology, 'Hinduism' was more a multi-tiered than two-tiered system (a divine hierarchy), and the issue that requires particular attention in relation to conversion is not so much African problem of explaining the transition from an emphasis on the lower tier to a focus on the supreme deity (most fully and satisfactorily represented in Christianity and Islam), but why belief in one kind of 'supreme deity', e.g., Vishnu or Shiva, was replaced by a belief in some other kind of 'non-Hindu' supreme being. Unlike Africans (as described by Horton). Hindus seeking more developed ideas of God, had no need to



search outside their own scriptures and traditions, which encompassed an extremely wider range of religious options.

Nevertheless, the Horton thesis is important. It does challenge scholars to think more about pre-conversion systems of thought and belief, and the way in which indigenous ideas and perceptions relate to conversion. Horton himself reminds us that the mind is not a *tabula rasa* 'automatically registering the imprint of external cultural influences' but rather 'the locus of thought-patterns and values that determine rather closely which of these influences will be accepted and which rejected'.<sup>4</sup>

## **Reasons for Conversion in India**

While there are no obvious or generally agreed forms of explanation most of the works highlight or, at the very least imply some kind of personal or corporate crisis which preceded, or was, in some way, inter-linked with conversion. The connection between conversion and crisis in tribal societies, a linkage which is central in Horton's model of African conversion, has already been noted by several scholars of Christian conversion in tribal societies in India. Downs<sup>5</sup> for example, has explored a combination of crises in the north eastern hill region where the pressures of colonial rule and of outside world threatened traditional cultures and ways of life and led to the rapid spread of Christianity among the various tribes in some parts of the region. And in the

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<sup>4</sup> Robin Horton, "On the Rationality of Conversion", Part .1, *Africa*, Vol.45, No.3, 1975, p221

<sup>5</sup> Frederick S Downs, "Christian Conversion Movements Among Hill Tribes of Northeast India in The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries", in G A Oddie, (ed) .), *Religion In South Asia: Religious Conversion And Revival Movements In South Asia In Medieval And Modern Times* (second revise and enlarged edition) Delhi, 1991, pp155-174.

case of Dalits, A.C.Paranjape<sup>6</sup> considers Untouchability as a causal factor in conversion.

Conversion is not new to India, especially in case of lower caste people. The conversions “indicate that the groups involved considered religious identity to be an important factor in their attempts to acquire a better and more dignified place in society.”<sup>7</sup> Forrester says: “conversion appealed as at least an apparent escape from caste system for those who despaired of achieving improvement of their lot within the system.”<sup>8</sup>

Conversions have taken place because of various reasons. For some they discard the ascribed status which is based on chance of birth. Forrester has said: “dignity, self-respect, patrons who will treat one as equal and the ability to choose one’s own destiny – all these are powerful incentives to conversion.”<sup>9</sup> Further he quotes Pickett as saying: what must never be neglected is that conversion movement is like a kind of group identity crisis, in which the group passes through a negative rejection of their lowly place in Hindu society to a positive affirmation of a new social and religious identity. This new identity does not depend on its acceptance or recognition by higher castes; indeed it has been chosen and is sustained despite their refusal to accept it. Only gradually does it lead to significant alterations in behavior and occupation and sometimes to a recognized enhancement of status.<sup>10</sup>

Dick Kooiman in his work, *Conversion and Social Inequality in India*, maintains that Conversion in India is closely linked with the social aspirations

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<sup>6</sup> A C Paranjape, *Caste, Prejudice and the Individual*, Bombay, Lalwani Publication, 1971, p13

<sup>7</sup> Dick Kooiman, *Conversion And Social Equality In India*, New Delhi, Manohar Publication,

p1

<sup>8</sup> Dunkan Forrester. *Caste And Conversion*, p103

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* p.75.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.* p.77.

of groups that suffer from discrimination and oppression. Since religion is supposed to cover all aspects of life the author argues that for Untouchables a change of religion may serve as an idiom of mobility. The Untouchables have been suffering from oppression and acute prejudices by caste Hindu for a very long time. A growing awareness of this social degradation has led many of the untouchables to convert to Islam, Christianity and Buddhism. Similarly, Sanjay Vairal<sup>11</sup> mentions that conversion to another religion by the untouchables in India was one way of escaping from disabilities created by Hinduism. The untouchables were in search of equality and betterment of their status by escaping forms of tyranny, rigidity, exploitation and oppression. Conversion as a phenomenon leading to change of faith has been one of the principal means through which social promotion was sought in India since ages. That is the main reason why conversions from the lowest castes of Hindu society have been markedly more frequent than from any other group.

### **Untouchability, its Roots and Consequences**

To be an untouchable in Indian caste system is to be very low in and partially excluded from, an elaborately hierarchical social order. Untouchables are persons of a discrete set of low castes, excluded on account of their extreme collective impurity from particular relations with higher beings (both human and divine). They makeup about 16 percent of Indian population and number above 140 million. They have been called by various names, such as 'Untouchables', 'Harijans', 'Exterior castes'(used by J.H.Hutton), 'Depressed Castes' (used by British officials), 'Outcastes', 'Pariahs'. In more ancient

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<sup>11</sup> Sanjay Vairal, "Religious Conversions And Dalit Identity", in Ambrose Pinto (ed) *Dalits Assertion For Identity*, New Delhi, Indian Social Institute Publication, 1999, pp128-131

times the terms 'Mlechha', 'Chandala' (used by Manu, also 'Panchama' the fifth class), 'Nishada', 'Pulkasa', 'Antyaja', 'Atishudra', etc., were used.

The disabilities with which the untouchables suffered were numerous and severe. The untouchables lived the life full of miseries, in short, as Dr. Ambedkar writes, "they are born impure, they are impure while they live, they have the death of impure, and they give birth to children who are born with the stigma of Untouchability affixed to them."<sup>12</sup> Untouchability is thus the most extreme form of pollution. Certain castes were supposed to be so polluted that even their touch would invite elaborate purificatory rituals for the members of the upper caste. The concept of Untouchability was carried to such an extreme that even the shadow of an untouchable would be polluting. During the late Peshwa period of the history of Maharashtra the practice of Untouchability was probably carried to its worst extreme.<sup>13</sup>

Untouchability in one form or the other was practiced all over India until independence, after which the Indian constitution outlawed the practice. However, the state ways can not completely change folkways and social change can not be brought about instantaneously. In spite of the legal provisions, discrimination on the basis of practice of Untouchability and other forms of discrimination have not stopped. The constitution only abolishes Untouchability; it does not abolish caste as such. Further only the state is prohibited against discrimination, not the individual members of the society.

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<sup>12</sup> B.R.Ambedkar. *The Untouchables*, p.14.

<sup>13</sup> Ghurye; 1961; p.11.

It is evident that state ways have not changed the folkways. Beteille<sup>14</sup> notes that the attitudes and behaviour of the upper castes toward the Harijans do not seem to have undergone radical change. Harold Isaacs<sup>15</sup> indicates that educated Harijans in the large cities either conceal their status or are treated with great circumspection. In rural areas contemporary attitudes towards Harijans vary greatly. Particularly in the village setting, victimization of the untouchables has often increased with the intensity of their efforts to achieve equality. For a number of reasons traditional attitude towards the Harijans have been difficult to modify. Pollution has deep roots in Hinduism. Also deeply embedded, at least in the popular mind, is the notion of inherited inequality. These ideas have been reinforced by the vested interests of the upper castes in their day-to-day relationships with Harijans.

S. Chandrasekhar, in his foreword to a recent volume on the untouchables recalls a memory from his own boyhood. One day he saw “a thin, middle –aged man being beaten and chased by the crowd from a Hindu temple on the river bank below...the man was an untouchable who had committed the unforgivable crime of drawing water from the temple well (available to other Hindus but not to untouchables) to quench his thirst on that hot day”.<sup>16</sup>

Beteille, for instance, mentions, the incident which occurred on 25th December 1968 when, “following a protracted quarrel between landowners and wage labourers, the houses along an entire Harijan street were set on fire

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<sup>14</sup> Andre Beteille “Pollution and Poverty”, in, J. M. Mahar. *The Untouchables In Contemporary India*, University Of Arizona Press, 1972. p.416.

<sup>15</sup> Harold R. Isaacs, in, J.M. Mahar. Op.cit.

<sup>16</sup> S. Chandrasekhar, in foreword to, Mahar, Op.cit, p.xi.

and forty two women and children burnt to death.”<sup>17</sup> Andre Beteille prefers to call India’s ex-untouchables as Harijans. While narrating their present social conditions Beteille brings out the connection between “pollution” and poverty. According to him, not only are the Harijans at the bottom of Indian society, but in purely material terms their levels of living far below those of comparable strata elsewhere. Although not all 60 million Harijans are destitute, the lives of a vast majority are characterized by uniform conditions of poverty. They tend also to be concentrated in rural areas, mainly as landless agricultural laborers. When they own land, usually it is insufficient to provide their living and they must work on the lands of others as well. Characteristically also, Harijans who own land do so in unfertile and non-irrigated regions.

Beteille adds, besides suffering from a low level of material existence, the Harijans have experienced a number of other deprivations which can best be understood in terms of the emphasis on purity and pollution in Indian social life. These concepts, although most systematically elaborated in the Hindu religion, are not without influence beyond Hinduism. First, as the dominant religion, Hinduism has influenced members of other faiths. Further, it seems likely that the low material status of the Harijans has made them accept more readily the roles assigned to them by members of the dominant community.

The opposition of the pure and the impure is what gives Hindu social structure its distinctive character. The Brahmin at one end and the Harijan at the other constitute the two fixed polar points of Indian traditional society. The links between Hinduism, the ideas of purity and pollution and the social

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<sup>17</sup> Beteille, in Mahar, op. cit., p.416.

situations of the Harijans are clear and beyond dispute. In the economically underdeveloped countries of Asia, where other religions predominate, poverty and destitution may be as acute as in India, but the poor – though often scorned and mistreated- are rarely regarded as “untouchable”. On this view, the polarity of purity and pollution (or Brahmin and Untouchable) not only gives Hindu society its distinctive character, but also forms one of its essential elements in every region and during most of India’s recorded history.<sup>18</sup>

The very idea that one is regarded as an untouchable by reason of the accident of birth is psychologically disturbing. The psychological effects of ascribed low social status on the personality of the victims of Untouchability can be very deep<sup>19</sup>. The concept of Untouchability can be considered to be a special case of the concept of pollution. If belief in the concept of pollution and the practice of rituals were to remain matters of private concern, probably there would not be much of a problem. However, the association of various degrees of pollution with various castes resulted in a rigid social system with high emphasis on ascription. Furthermore, the inequality of status was sanctioned by Hindu religion through practices like non-admittance of untouchables into temples, prevention of access for various castes to the learning of scriptures and even drinking water and so on. In spite of the strong ideological and religious movements it is hard to say that the concept of pollution has disappeared from Indian society. Castes continue to grade people on superiority–inferiority axis that is quite parallel to the purity-pollution axis.

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<sup>18</sup> Andre Beteille, “Pollution and Poverty”, in M. J. Mahar (ed.) Op.cit. p.413.

<sup>19</sup> A.C.Paranjape: *Caste, Prejudice and Individuals*; Lalvani Publishing House, Bom.bay, 1970, p.11.

## Untouchability as a Factor of Conversion

Since the concept of Untouchability is just a part of the whole religious ideology, a method, for the untouchable, to reject its burden was to deny the whole system rather than fight against the part of it. In fact many untouchables became converted to Christianity and Islam with a hope for emancipation from the ascribed low status. In the same way Ambedkar, converted himself to Buddhism along with hundreds of thousands of his followers. In Buddhism he found the hope because of its egalitarian, universal, democratic nature. What he disapproved of Hinduism—the concept of gods, soul, ‘chaturvarnya’ and caste — were absent in Buddhism<sup>20</sup>. Furthermore he preferred Buddhism because of its three principles: ‘*prajna*’- understanding, against superstition and supernaturalism of Hinduism, ‘*karuna*’- compassion and love for all, and ‘*samta*’- equality, for which the untouchables were striving all these years and which was denied to them by Hinduism.

## Conversion Experience in India – An Overview

If we accept Rambo’s suggestion that conversion has a variety of meanings but take, as a starting point, popular usage and the idea of the conversion as the act or process of joining a new religious community, then what more can be said about the practice in India and the people involved?

In his book *Muslims of British India*, Peter Hardy endorses the view that in Indian life ‘conversion’ means ‘more a change of fellowship than of conduct or inner life’; but he then adds a significant rider, that ‘the latter [the

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<sup>20</sup> Bhagwan Das. *Thus Spoke Ambedkar*



change in conduct or inner life] may in time occur.<sup>21</sup> While the rituals of admission were outward and visible signs of a new status, and, for some, the first step in a genuine spiritual journey, they have also been appropriated and used by individuals and groups as a sign of their sense of dissatisfaction and desire for a change in what might be described as 'traditional identity'.

Census reports have been used to express and claim new forms of social or religious identity.<sup>22</sup> A careful critical analysis of the material can yield useful results and provide some evidence about the way in which indigenous people describe themselves. The census reports can be useful in telling us at least something about the insiders' sense of allegiance, communal affiliation and feelings about religious identity.

Another issue relating to conversion as something which involves a change of fellowship is the idea that it necessarily involves an 'opting out' as well as a 'joining in'. In some cases it did involve a burning of bridges and a deliberate opting out. One of the classic illustrations of this process is the Basel Mission Christians of the west coast. Rudolph Fischer has argued that the mission succeeded in establishing its own economic and social system which was virtually sealed off from all contact with 'Hindu' society.<sup>23</sup> But there can be little doubt that this form of extreme isolation was unusual. The crucial point is that the adoption of a new identity did not necessarily mean a complete rejection of the old.

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, Cambridge, 1972, p8.

<sup>22</sup> G. A. Oddie, "Christians in the Census: Tanjore and Trichinopoly District", 1871-1901, in N. G. Barrier (ed.) *The Census in British India: New Perspectives*, Delhi 1981, pp129-130.

<sup>23</sup> Rudolph H Fischer, "Christianisation and Social Mobility in Nineteenth Century South Kanara and Malabar: A Look at the Basel Mission Experience", in G.A. Oddie (ed.), *Religion in South Asia: Religious Conversion and Revival Movements in South Asia in Medieval and Modern Times* (second revised and enlarged edition) Delhi, 1991, pp125-154.

Susan Bayly's work<sup>24</sup> shows that most converts who joined a new religious community continued to relate in some ways to their community of origin. For many of them it was not a case of either / or, but striking a right balance between the old and new, or perhaps of adopting an additional identity. They were rather like people who keep 'dual citizenship' where the experience, memories and culture of the old world continue to permeate and flavor the new and where the old concerns and values are not always left behind. What Susan Bayly has argued in her work is that in the examples she has studied Muslims and Christians continued to share in what she describes as the 'indigenous moral order'.<sup>25</sup>

All of these accounts point to the wide range of psychological factors involved in religious change and conversion. We are also reminded of Nock's definition of the process of conversion as 'the re-orientation of the soul of the individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right'.<sup>26</sup>

Religious conversions are an interesting phenomenon from the psycho-sociological point of view. William James wrote about the psychology of the conversion as early as 1902.<sup>27</sup> He quotes the observations made by E. D. Starbuck who had earlier made a statistical inquiry into the nature of religious conversions. Conversions were characterized by preceding symptoms of a

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<sup>24</sup> Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses, and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society 1700-1900*, Cambridge, 1989, p8

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p8.

<sup>26</sup> A D Knock, *Conversion: The Old And The New In Religion From Alexander The Great To Augustine Of Hippo*, London, 1933, p7

<sup>27</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York, (Mentor Ed) New American Library of World Literature, 1958, chapter 9&10.

sense of incompleteness and imperfection, brooding, depression, morbid introspection, anxiety about the future and so on. Then came the spontaneous religious awakening which in some cases was characterized by mystical experiences. In most cases this was sudden and transitory, and lead to a happy relief, development of a wider outlook and a regaining of self-confidence. Starbuck observed that conversion was mostly an adolescent phenomenon. William James described conversion as a change in the habitual centre of personal energy of the convert.

Recently some social-psychologists have revived an interest in certain similar phenomena. Erik Erickson,<sup>28</sup> For example, speaks of ideology as an important aspect of an individual's ego-identity, and maintains that acceptance of an ideology (which he also refers to as a religion) is an important part of an adolescent's attempt to resolve his identity-crisis. In this sense a religious conversion may be said to be a change in a person's ego-identity. Dissatisfied with the proposition, "I am a Hindu (or X)", one changes over to the proposition; "I am a Buddhist (or Y)". But this change is not a simple proposition, because being a Hindu or a Christian is an integral part of ones identity which is the core of one's personality. The cases of conversion of a large number of ex-untouchables from Hinduism to Buddhism can neither be a case of adolescent conversion as described by William James nor a case of forced conversions. The psychological processes in mass conversions seem to be different from the conversions described by James. What then are the

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<sup>28</sup> Eric H Erickson, *Identity and the Life Cycle, Psychological Issues*, New York, International Universities Press. 1959, p1 (1) and Also See *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, New York, Norton, 1968.

psychological processes involved in mass conversions? An attempt to understand this process will be made in one of the following chapters.

## **The Buddhist Conversion of 1956**

One of the unique events that took place in the social history of post independent India was the embracing of Buddhism by more than three hundred thousand Dalits in a day. And within five years the number rose to three million. The converts belonged to the so-called Hindu untouchable castes that had for centuries together suffered from various disabilities in the social, religious, economic, and political spheres.

The conversion movement was initiated by Dr. Ambedkar. The Hindu society failed to give a respectable place to the Dalits. Therefore they embraced Buddhism, where one is free from the taint of Untouchability and other humiliating and dehumanizing conditions and from the notion of high and low and other disabilities on the basis of caste.

Forrester, referring to the Buddhist conversion movement since 1956 calls it the "most spectacular, interesting and significant phenomena, demonstrating that even at a time when much has been gained for untouchables through political action, the question of religious identity real and alive. It is so real that many are willing to sacrifice the protection and advantages which are accrued to Hindu Harijans."<sup>29</sup> There is probably also some disillusionment with the fruits of political action and statutory enactments. They by themselves can not provide dignity and self-respect which in fact is sought.

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<sup>29</sup> Forrester Dunkan, op.cit. p.92.

In the case of the untouchables the identification was provided by the criterion that these persons belonging to particular castes, locally defined in each region, were regarded as 'untouchable', in the sense that their touch and sometimes even their shadow were considered polluting by all other castes. Thus, the identity of one, being an untouchable was imposed on the individual and on the caste by other caste groups. These other caste groups were themselves organized hierarchically and had varying degrees of social exclusion separating one from the other, but all of them regarded the physical touch of the locally defined 'untouchable' castes to be polluting. Though the identification of particular castes as 'untouchable' was at the local or regional level, untouchable individuals suffered from the associated disabilities and discrimination wherever they went, if their identity became known. This is an aspect of the larger caste phenomenon that though individual castes are local-regional groupings of the caste 'system', the national groupings of castes into a hierarchy, is an all-India phenomenon.

Since caste is primarily a socio-religious categorization, rather than one based on racial, physically identifiable characteristics, its historical continuity was ensured by the rule of caste endogamy so that the birth of an individual determined his caste. The identification of individuals as belonging to particular castes was also traditionally facilitated by differences in styles of clothing, head-dress, hairstyles, and types of ornament and, generally, by variations in vocabulary and pronunciation passed down from one generation to another.

In a protest ideology even these externally imposed, discriminative identification marks can become points of mobilizing resentment. Ambedkar

did this with great force and skill. He made his untouchable folks aware of the indignities heaped on them and sought to arouse their pride as human beings.

Ambedkar's actions provide the nucleus of pride and defiance around which the new identity of the untouchable as rebel could be built. This was a very different kind of self-identity from that of the meek and servile, uncomplaining and ever-obedient untouchable who swept the village streets and worked in the farms. From another perspective, the negative identification of being an untouchable imposed by the upper castes was sought to be replaced with a positive self-image. The final act of embracing Buddhism was also an extension (and fulfillment) of the search for a positive answer to the question of identity.

The mass conversion to Buddhism in 1956 was Ambedkar's effort to put into practice the assertion of a unique identity of Dalits. Conversion included the practical consequences of social rebellion refusing to 'do the work of Hindu', that is to carry away dead cattle or perform any other of their ordained caste duties. Such refusals, in individual villages, had brought reprisals and atrocities. Yet the implementation in practice of a non-Hindu identity, socially conceived, was a massive achievement.

### **Untouchables, Ex-untouchables, Harijans, Dalits and Scheduled Castes**

Two broad propositions are fundamental to the present work. The first is that the ex-Untouchables are among the very bottom elements of Indian society; and the second is that they have undergone a profound change in their view of themselves and society around them. The subject immediately opens

up a set of intellectual problems surrounding the personal and social identity of the people in question. The first issue is that of nomenclature. Some scholars have chosen to use the term 'Untouchables' as general identifier of the people about whom this work is dealing, but this choice is hedged about with difficulties. The most powerful comment against this term is that almost no one identifies him/herself by reference to it. Presumably a primary ground of this non-use is that the word encapsulates the subordinated condition that the people in question are seeking to escape from. Why would one identify oneself by reference to an odious condition imposed by others? The possible alternative terms fall into several different categories. The first category is names of a clearly political character. The two leading terms are 'Harijan' and 'Dalit'.

The term 'Harijan' was adopted by Gandhi in 1933. Gandhi's objective was to invent a name, which identified the relevant people without fixing them with an inferior status- 'Harijan', is translatable as 'People of God'. The term soon lost support. Many of them dislike this because of its secondary meaning, that is, "child of the temple of god" or child of a sacred prostitute, one whose father is not known and is therefore called "god's child".<sup>30</sup> To many, the word appears as a patronizing and ultimately meaningless exercise. What does it mean to say that traditionally deprived and despised communities are people of god? Thus the term has come to be seen as a symbol of the non-radical integrationist politics of Gandhi and his followers. The word became something of an epithet among Untouchables themselves. 'He is a Harijan' was sometimes used pejoratively by assertivists to denote a person who had

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<sup>30</sup> L. kendi. 1995, *Revival of Buddhism in India: the Role of B. R. Ambedkar and the Dalai Lama* xiv. Ashish Publishing House, New Delhi.

internalised attitudes of inferiority and had an accepting view of his place in Hindu world. For these reasons it seemed inappropriate to employ this term in this work, except in specialized context.

The word 'Dalit' is now fast supplanting the other generic names for persons descended from the old untouchable castes. This is a word in Marathi language. In an 1831 dictionary the word was defined as 'ground' or 'broken or reduced to pieces generally' (Moleworth's Marathi-English Dictionary 1831). It was seemingly first used in the context of caste oppression by the great nineteenth century reformer Phule, but its modern history dates from the early 1970s among activists from the Untouchable castes.<sup>31</sup> By now the term has spread throughout India. Like 'Harijan' the term is intensely political, but the politics this time are more assertive and 'self directed', sometime separatist. Although the word is now widespread, it still has deep roots in the tradition of political radicalism inspired by the figure of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. The term is undoubtedly gaining ground among ex-Untouchables. Most of the ex-untouchables would introduce themselves as 'Dalit', a term popularized by untouchable protest movements. A literal translation of the word 'Dalit' is 'the oppressed', but the term Dalit has become a positive, assertive expression of pride in untouchable heritage and a rejection of oppression. Other descriptive terms often appear. 'Harijan' (children of god), is most familiar to higher-caste Hindus; but is seldom used by today's untouchable activists, who dislike its patronizing tone and reject the strategy of reliance on higher caste noblesse oblige with which it is associated. There is a significant difference between Dalit consciousness and either a Harijan or a Schedule Caste consciousness.

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<sup>31</sup> Zelliot 1992; 167,271.



According to John Webster<sup>32</sup>, while the terms Harijan and Schedule Caste are "benevolence and benefit oriented", the term Dalit goes beyond that-to assert the right to one's own chosen identity.

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The second category is the cluster of terms devised mainly in British bureaucratic contexts-above all the census- from late in the nineteenth century to the 1930s. These terms included 'Out Castes', 'Depressed Castes' and 'Exterior Castes'. The end point in this verbal/conceptual development is the term 'Schedule Castes', now the official identifier of castes entitled to Parliamentary seats, public employment and special educational benefits. While the term has useful moral neutrality, it is essentially legal in nature. The people in question have been transformed into a special legal class of citizens for certain purposes of the State. We will need to use the term frequently when dealing with provisions of government, but it is inappropriate for more general use. Perhaps the least attractive term is 'ex-Untouchable', often used in the early years after independence and still to be found today. The term is legally sound-Untouchability was abolished by the Constitution of India (article 17) - and also appears to distance the practitioner from the morality of Untouchability. But the term is sociologically false, if one takes the view that Untouchability has not in fact been dismantled. The Untouchables are not a people of any single ethnic or cultural identity. The primary constituent of this grouping is the common experience of a particular and severe form of social oppression.

<sup>32</sup> J.C.B. Webster, "Rise Of Dalit Consciousness", in: S.M. Michael, *Emerging Dalit Consciousness*, pp.5-6.

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## The Subject and Scope:

One section of Indian society, which has drawn considerable attention of scholars are the people who call themselves “Dalits” (oppressed)<sup>33</sup>. Some of their works deal with the history of the Dalits problems and its relationship with the caste system, having its roots in the Hindu religion<sup>34</sup>, some deal with the role of Dalits in politics<sup>35</sup>. Some works deal with regional groups of Dalits and their struggle to change their status in society<sup>36</sup>. Some describe the role played by individual leaders in the struggle of Dalits<sup>37</sup>; some discuss the question of reservation, known also as compensatory discrimination or preferential treatment of Dalits<sup>38</sup>. Some present individual experience, more like autobiographies<sup>39</sup>, some offer analyses of the Dalits’ problem either by dealing with the Dalit movement in a particular region or different region of India or with the question of mobility from one religion to another<sup>40</sup>. Some works have also appeared as anthologies of selections of Dalits’ works (in

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<sup>33</sup> Oommen, T. K.; *Protest and Change: Studies in Social Movements*; New Delhi, 1990, p.254.

<sup>34</sup> (a) Mukherjee, Prabhati : *Beyond The Four Varnas*, Delhi, 1988

(b) Rao, R. Sangeetha : *Caste System In India : Myth And Reality*, New Delhi, 1989

(c) Sharma, Ram Sharan; *Sudras in Ancient India*, Delhi, 1990 ( 3<sup>rd</sup> revised edition)

(d) Patil, Sharad, *Dasa-Sudra Slavery*, Pune, 1991.

<sup>35</sup> (a) Gupta, S. K. : *The Schedule Castes in Modern Indian Politics*, New Delhi, 1985

(b) Gokhale, Jayashree : *From Concessions To Confrontation : The Politics Of The Indian Untouchable Community*, Bombay, 1993

<sup>36</sup> (a) Juergensmeyer, Mark : *Religion As Social Vision : The Movement Against Untouchability In 20<sup>th</sup> Century Punjab*, Berkeley, 1982

(b) Gooptu, Nandini : “ Caste, Deprivation And Politics : The Untouchables In U.P. Towns In Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century”, In, *Dalit Movements And The Meanings Of Labour In India*, Bombay, 1993

<sup>37</sup> (a) O’ Hanlon, Rosalind : *Caste, Conflict And Ideology : Mahatma Jotirao Phule And Low Caste Protest In 19<sup>th</sup> Century Western India*, Cambridge, 1985

(b) Zelliot, Eleanor : *From Untouchable To Dalit : Essays On Ambedkar Movement*, New Delhi, 1992

<sup>38</sup> (a) Galanter, Marc : *Competing Equalities, Law And The Backward Classes In India*, Bombay, 1984

(b) Kananaikil, Jose : “ The Schedule Caste And Their Status In India”, In, *Inequalities, Its Basis : Search For Solution*, Walter Fernandes( ed.), New Delhi, 1996

<sup>39</sup> (a) Khare, R.S. : *The Untouchable As Himself : Ideology, Identity, And Pragmatism Among The Lucknow Chamars*, Cambridge, 1994

(b) Das, D. P., *The Untouchables*, New Delhi, 1984

<sup>40</sup> (a) Aggarwal, Pratap Chand : *Halfway To Equality*, New Delhi, 1983

English translation)<sup>41</sup> ; new ones have also appeared which are more aggressive from the Dalits' point of view<sup>42</sup>. Recent works deal with the question of indigenous people<sup>43</sup>.

The available works thus deal mostly with specific aspects of the Dalit issue such as the caste system or the aspect of the Dalit struggle in some region of India. The present work will deal firstly with the Dalits in general in India, the history of their identity. The discussion of their history will also include the role of religion and how far it has acted as an agent of bondage or liberation for the Dalits. The work will discuss in detail the role of religious conversion as a source of liberation and identity formation. Further, it explores the implication of conversion on the larger structure of society. Specifically the work highlights the process of Buddhist conversion and the psycho-social aspect of the Buddhist conversion movement in India since 1956.

Since independence, the number of nominal adherents to Buddhism in India has significantly increased. For these low castes, Buddhist conversion was intended to free men from caste and to remove the stigma of Untouchability by building a new cultural and religious identity outside Hinduism. How does conversion to Buddhism affect the untouchable? Fiske

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<sup>41</sup> (a) Anand, Mulk Raj And Eleanor Zelliot(eds.) *An Anthology Of Dalit Literature. Poems*, New Delhi, 1992

(b) Dangle, Arjun : *Poison Bread ( Translation From Modern Marathi Dalit Literature )*, New Delhi, 1992

<sup>42</sup> (a) Swami, Dharama Theertha : *History Of Hindu Imperialism*, Madras, 1992 ( 5<sup>th</sup> edition)

(b) Kurundkar, Narhar : *Manusmirti : Contemporary Thoughts*, Bombay, 1993

<sup>43</sup> (a) Elst. Koenraad : *Indigenous Indians : Agastya To Ambedkar*, New Delhi, 1993

(b) Rajaram. Navaratna S. : *Aryan Invasion Of India : The Myth And The Truth*, New Delhi, 1993

(c) Talageri, Shrikant G. : *Aryan Invasion Theory And Indian Nationalism*. New Delhi, 1993

(d) Sethna, K. D.: *The Problem of Aryan Origins: From an Indian Point of View*, 1992(2<sup>nd</sup> edition).

concluded that above all the conversion has given the untouchables a sense of psychological freedom.

Timothy Fitzgerald has tried to sketch some of the elements of the multifaceted Buddhist movement. He maintains that Buddhists are caught up in a pervasive system which is not simply external to them, which structures their consciousness, at least to some extent. Buddhists do not live in isolation, but are part of hierarchical social structure which embraces all Indian people. Buddhist conversion has created a social space in which individuals can achieve something of a new identity. Our effort here will be to examine the nature of this identity formation.

Several studies made to assess the relationship of the Buddhist conversion movement to various aspects – mostly political, religious and cultural – life of its followers, have been undertaken in the past. Some such studies suggest that the movement was linked up with a religious life and has actually succeeded in improving their lives, not externally, but internally, and psychologically. This psychological ‘purifying’ process, they claim, still goes on. Another study interpreted it as being a ‘revitalizing’ movement, a deliberate rejection of the old life-style in favour of a new, more satisfying culture.

In our study of Buddhists we have tried to understand whether this conversion to Buddhism has brought about any significant changes in the position of the neo-Buddhists. Particularly we have tried to find out how neo-Buddhists perceive their situation after embracing Buddhism. Whether they feel that they have achieved the new identity, the aspired social position or are they still forced to live with their stigmatized identity?

In the following pages of this work an attempt is made to describe the facts and the feature of conversion based on the existing literature with an emphasis on what conversion means and does to the individual members and groups. At the same time, an attempt is made to identify problems and concepts relevant to the socio-psychological transition from one religion to the other.

## **Objectives**

The present study examines in detail all those reasons that led to their embracing of Buddhism; and more importantly, the series of social and psychological problems they faced after their conversion. To explain these problems, Uttara Shastree has used the conceptual framework of 'marginal man' as adumbrated by the Chicago Sociologists- Park and Stonequist. After embracing Buddhism the new converts landed in a peculiar dilemma. Shastree has pointed out that the neo-Buddhists began to see themselves through two looking -glasses, each presenting clashing images. .

Generally marginality could be a passing phase in the life cycle of an individual, but in the life of the convert Buddhists, it could continue for longer because of the unchangeable mindset of the Hindus and the exploitation of the so-called untouchable castes by the political parties.

Further, in our study of neo-Buddhist we have tried to understand whether this conversion to Buddhism has brought about any significant changes in the position of the Buddhist. Particularly we have tried to find out:

(1) How Buddhists tried to perceive their situation after embracing Buddhism?

(2) Whether they feel that they have achieved the new identity, the aspired social position?

(3) Or, are they frustrated. And if so, what are the consequences?

The conversion to Buddhism meant, theoretically, the rejection of all aspects of Hinduism, its beliefs and practices. And it meant the acceptance of Buddhism, its ethical tenets, the eight-fold path, and other Buddhists practices.

Apart from raising questions about the nature of religious identity and community and the processes involved in joining new types of religious fellowship, the present work also raises the related questions about transition in belief.

In embracing Buddhism the basic effort was to find a new identity. Ambedkar who evolved the new identity for the former untouchable wanted to erase completely their Hindu identity. But the deep-rooted beliefs, which were nurtured for centuries together, would not be easy to thrust aside. So during the transitional phase, divided loyalty, ambivalence of attitude, which characterizes the marginal group, would be their peculiar characteristic traits.

Even a preliminary acquaintance with the literature on caste would indicate that the contributions by social psychologist are meager as compared to that of sociologist and political sociologist. As a result the importance of socio-psychological factors in understanding various phenomenon and problems related to conversion has not been fully explored. A phenomenon as complex as conversion can be expected to influence the lives of individuals or groups in a number of ways. However, what aspect of an individual or group experience and behaviour are influenced by conversion is not adequately

known. Individuals and groups are not merely creature and a carrier of culture, but also a manipulator and a creator of culture. It would be therefore significant to know what socio-psychological processes help perpetuate the traditional system and what processes may help social change.

With the above mentioned objectives, the present work is divided into three chapters. The first chapter of this work is titled '*Theoretical Orientations*'. The main task of this chapter will be to apply sociological, as well as socio-psychological theories, in order to analyse the social life of the Dalits in Indian society. The next chapter titled '*Buddhist Conversion of 14<sup>th</sup> October 1956: Central Issues and Salient Features*' deals with the central features and events of the Buddhist conversion of 1956. The main focus of this chapter is to bring-out all those issues which were central to the course of events that led to the final mass conversion of Dalits into Buddhism in 1956. The final chapter is titled '*Liberation and Identity Formation of Buddhists*' will deal with the effects of conversion on Dalits. The various processes involved the psychological liberation and identity formation of the converts.

## Chapter I

### Theoretical Orientations

The effort in this chapter will be to analyse the role of Hindu religion in the identification of untouchables. Here we will interrogate (with the help of sociological and socio-psychological theories) how their social history and collective identity has affected their socio-psychological attributes and social life.

Religion, one of the most influential institutions of human society, continues to be a matter of absorbing interest for philosophers, historians and sociologists alike. Religion has been viewed in the social context from two extreme points of view. In terms of its functional significance to the society and the social system it was described as a great integrating force. In its dysfunctional context it was treated as opium of the masses since it was considered to be operating at the level of consciousness, in such a manner that it creates false worldview and obstructs the scientific understanding of the social reality.

In general, sociology views religion as a system of core principle that underlay human values, beliefs, attitudes and perception. Religion seeks to explain, understand and predict the relationship between man and man, on one hand, and man and nature, on the other. Religion at the formal level is a human invention that seeks to systematize a body of knowledge that human beings have acquired and passed on from generation to generation over thousand of years<sup>1</sup>. For an individual, religion is a set of concrete principles, practices and usages, which shape his identity. Religious identity forms an important segment of personal identity, which

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<sup>1</sup> A.K.Mohanty, "Religion: Its Surface And Deep Structure", in P.K.Mohapatra (ed.) *Religion and Social Change*. Akash Publications, Cuttak, 1993. p.99.



provides subjective meaning to the concept of self. Thus, better parts of an individual answer to '*Who Am I*'?

There are two levels on which identity operates namely individual and collective. One's name and status he/she occupies in his community establishes individual identity. Two questions, to an individual would reveal his/her identity. The first one is "who am I"? This is generally answered by an assertion of continuity through genealogy and residence and by pointing lineage, family status and place of birth or residence. The second question is "*What Am I*"? This is generally answered by assertion of distinctiveness through culture and community and has to be answered by revealing one's inner-self, one's membership of and adherence to particular culture and distinctive communities. Collective identities are composed of individual members. And as such, people have multiple identities as manual workers, members of religious community, ethnic group, caste and nation. The basic and important cultural elements of collative identity are:

1. A sense of stability and footedness of the particular unit of population.
2. A sense of difference or distinctness and separateness of that cultural unit.
3. A sense of continuity with previous generations of the cultural unit through memories, myths and traditions.
4. A Sense of destiny and mission of shared hopes and aspiration of that culture.

The sense of stability and footedness is imparted by traditions including customs laws, codes and rituals. The sense of difference and distinctiveness of the community is expressed through flags, emblems, costumes, special food and sacred objects. The sense of continuity with previous generations is rooted in the

memories of past sacrifices, victories, defeats and deeds of heroism. Collective courage, honour, wisdom compassion and justice confer the sense of destiny and mission.

## **Collective Identity**

Collective identity of members of a group is formed when the group has certain characteristics. The main features of collective identity are:

- (1) A collective name, which symbolizes the uniqueness of the community and distinguishes it from others.
- (2) Myths of common origin which relates all the members to common ancestors, birthplace and foundation.
- (3) A shared history i.e. the shared memories of successive generation of the collective community.
- (4) One or more common cultural characteristics which can serve to distinguish members from non- members such as institutions, customs, relations with non-members', color, language, etc.
- (5) A sense of solidarity on the part of at least a significant segment of the collective community.

The previous section explained the features of collective cultural group. Here, we try and bring out the features of Dalit community necessary to form an identical collective community. The first characteristic is a collective name and common origin. The erstwhile untouchables of the Hindu social order are clearly distinguished from the other Hindu castes and obviously symbolize the uniqueness

of the community. This collective untouchable community has, gradually, come to be known as 'Dalits', meaning the battered or crushed or broken people.

Broadly speaking, Dalits is that section of people who were placed at the lowest rung of the Hindu society. They were treated as untouchables and were known by different names in different parts of the country. They were called as Ati-Shudra, Antyaja, Avarna or Naam-Shudra. Their shadow was considered as polluting and they stayed beyond the boundaries of the villages or towns. The *shared memory* of the Dalit community includes all sorts of restriction that were put on them by the law-giver, thereby making life hopeless for them. The Untouchability to which the community was subjected has no parallel anywhere in the world or any period of history of mankind. The inhuman practices having religious sanctions are the bitter memories of Dalit communities. The other characteristic that binds the Dalit community is their common history.

### **Psycho- Social Dimensions**

Sivaprakasam explains that social discrimination is deeply ingrained in Dalit psyche<sup>2</sup>. Exploitation, oppression, humiliation and multiple-form of deprivation still persist even after independence. At the level of day-to-day living, Dalits are treated in all possible unfair ways by upper caste Hindus, especially Brahmins. A Dalit's contribution is not recognized in any area. They are always put in an environment, which will hamper their personal development and performance. Constant attempts are made to destroy their "self".

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<sup>2</sup> M.N.Sivaprakasam: *Dalits And Social Mobilization*; Rajat Publications, New Delhi, 2002. pp84-85.

According to P.G. Jogdand<sup>3</sup>, the history of these people in the caste ridden society in India is a history of their continuous suffering and oppressions. They suffered from the multiple deprivations and were the victims of “cumulative domination”. There was a glaring social, economic and political inequality among the castes. For nearly two thousands years Untouchability has been practiced in the social and religious life of the country. The roots of this evil have gone so deep in to the system that the untouchables are subjected to the numerous social, economic and religious disabilities even in independent India. The bulk of the Hindus are still deeply concerned about purity and pollution. For nearly two thousand years Untouchability has been practiced in the social and religious life of the country by the caste Hindus. The roots of this evil has gone so deep into the system that the untouchables (now the scheduled castes) are subjected to the numerous social, economic and religious disabilities even in independent India.

The autobiographies, like “Baluta” by Daya Pawar and “Upra” by Laxman Mane, give us details of the identities of SCs. “Baluta” explains, how SCs suffered from the rigidities of the caste system, the insensitive attitude of the *savarnas* towards the untouchables, physical exploitation and social dominance exercised over the lower castes by the village elite, politics of manipulation and control by the upper castes and above all, the submissive and compliant behavior of the untouchables themselves, especially among the elderly people. Even the compliant behavior of the untouchables was directly encouraging exploitation. Upra means the person who has no home of his own, who stays on *Ukirda* (garbage ground), who can not claim anything of his own: no land, no home, no property, no society, and no status. Those who have to depend on others for survival are called *Upras*.

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<sup>3</sup> P.G.Jogdand.1981. “*From Discrimination To Movement-A Study Of Dalit Movement In Maharashtra*”. Unpublished M.Phil. Dissertation, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

defining Dalit identity, it is equally necessary to become conscious of the beliefs, myths perceptions, attitudes and values internalized by the Dalits as a result of the identity given to them. Consciousness of the oppressive outside reality coupled with awareness of internalized oppressive caste norms and beliefs is a necessity to evolve an identity of their own.

Birth of a child in a traditionally low caste family means an additional mouth to feed adding to the poverty already undermining physical and mental health of young ones, parents and elderly members. A newly born child in such families enters the world of ignorance, poverty, deprivation and abominable filth and continues to live with it all his life.

A child during infancy and early childhood may not know the caste he belongs to<sup>5</sup>, but it is not far from truth that he experiences poverty and deprivation more in comparison to a caste-Hindu child. During this period there is greatly heightened susceptibility to specific experiences. He soon comes to realize that his status in the society is different in comparison to other children. Between the ages of 3-6 years, the child develops awareness of his social group and the behavioral manifestations of caste awareness and incipient attitudes show systematic development during the pre-school period<sup>6</sup>, which get correctly categorized around eight years of age<sup>7</sup>. Around this age a Hindu child is fully aware of whom to play with, which child to touch and whose eatables to receive or reject, and these

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<sup>5</sup> Katz, P.A. and Zalk, S.R. (1974), "Doll Preference: An Index of Racial Attitude?" *Journal of Educational Psychology* 66 (5) pp.663-668.

<sup>6</sup> Clark, K. B. And Clark, M. P. (1947) "Racial Identification and Preference in Negro Children"; in, T. M. New Comb and E.L. Hartley (eds.) *Readings In Social Psychology*, New York, Holt.

<sup>7</sup> (a) Goodman, M. (1964) *Race Awareness In Young Children: Cambridge Mass; Addison Wesley*, 1952 (2nd ed. New York: Crowell-Collier, 1964).

(b) Morland, J. K. (1966) "A Comparison of Race Awareness in Northern and Southern Children", *American Journal of Ortho-Psychiatry*. 36(1) pp 22-32.

(c) Porter, J. (1971) *Black Children, White Children: The Development of Racial Attitude*, Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press.

childhood experience have great potency with long lasting effects<sup>8</sup>. In the pre-school children, three factors determining the racial and caste-awareness has been described. These are learning and cognitive factors and perceptual mechanisms. Re-inforcement of these factors leads the child to acquire caste-attitudes. Frequent derogatory and insulting remarks addressed to low caste people lead the children of these groups to enclose them in their own dwellings. By the time, the child reaches eight years of age, he identifies with his caste group as well as with his role in the society<sup>9</sup>. Even in the universities, there are teachers who do not like to see the face of untouchables making them the victim of their harassments<sup>10</sup> and on top of it, it is said that the spread of education among low castes in independent India is slower<sup>11</sup> because of poverty and their ignorance<sup>12</sup>.

As a result, their behavior profile is an extension of what an untouchable of pre-independence era used to have, surviving at the mercy of caste-Hindu masters, attributing misery and serfdom to God's will, or one's own misdeeds in the previous life. The mediating mechanism that they adopt of attributing success or failure to external agencies, frequently leads to superstitious behavior, perpetuation of fatalistic outlook, ritualism and ingratiating of the significant others.

The negative self-evaluation of the cognitive approach hypothesizes that; people become socially anxious when they evaluate themselves unfavorably on important social dimensions. When people regard themselves negatively and or

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<sup>8</sup> Pringle, Mia Kellmer (1974) *The Needs Of Children*, Hutchinson, London.

<sup>9</sup> Radke, M. and Sutherland, J. (1949) "Children's Concepts and Attitudes about Minority and Majority". *American Groups Journal of Educational Psychology* 40(8) pp 449-468.

<sup>10</sup> Asirvad, N. (1992) *Human Rights In India Today*, Compiled By Jose. P. Verghese, National Centre For Production Of Human Rights, New Delhi, p. 70.

<sup>11</sup> (a) Naik, J. P. (1971) *Education Of Scheduled Castes 1965-66*. ICSSR, New Delhi

(b) Chitnis, Suma. "Education For Equality : Case Of Scheduled Castes". *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. VII no. 31-33 1972 pp. 1675-81.

<sup>12</sup> Pimley, P. N. (1987) "Problem of Non Attendants of School among Scheduled Castes Children", In. *Reform Protest and Social Transformation*, Ashish Publishing House, New Delhi, p. 120.

believe they will be unable to handle the social demands of a particular encounter they are likely to experience social anxiety<sup>13</sup>. Viewed from this perspective whether their negative self-evaluations are warranted is beside the point. Imagined social deficiencies are likely to trigger social anxiety as real ones.

Peoples' feelings of self-worth are partially dependent upon others' evaluation of them<sup>14</sup>. Others' appraisals are a major determinant of how people perceive and evaluate themselves<sup>15</sup>. Since peoples' feelings about themselves are partially based upon how they believe they are regarded by others, people can raise their self-esteem by obtaining favorable reactions from others. This may lead the individual to feel better about him or herself. Indian low castes carry a very low self-concept and self-esteem because of historical and social reasons. Partially, yet significantly their self-evaluation is based on how the caste-Hindus evaluate them. Caste Hindus will never grant them positive evaluation and therefore psychologically they are bound to stay where they were.

## Caste- Stigma and Dalits

Majority of untouchables, 'Harijans' and scheduled castes that have joined 'white collar' class are averse to these words. To them these words are synonymous with poverty, humiliation and a life of obligation and slavery. Giving

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<sup>13</sup> (a) Clark, J. V. and Araowitz, H. (1975) "Social Anxiety and Self Evaluation of Inter Personal Performance", Psychological Reports 36, pp. 211-221.

(b) Rehm, L. P. and Marston, A. R. (1968) "Reduction of Social Anxiety Through Modification Of Self Reinforcement"; Journal Of Consulting And Clinical Psychology; Vol. 32 pp. 565-574.

<sup>14</sup> (a) Cooley, C. H. (1922) *Human Nature and The Social Order* (Revised Edition), Scriber (Original Published 1902), New York.

(b) Cooper Smith, S. (1967) *The Antecedents Of Self Esteem*, W. H. Freeman, San Francisco.

(c) Mead, G. W. (1934) *Mind Self and Society*, University Of Chicago Press, Chicago.

<sup>15</sup> (a) Bakman, C., Second, P., and Pierce, J. (1963) *Resistance To Change In Self Concept As A Function Of Consensus Among Significant Others*, Socio-metry, Vol. 26 pp. 102-111.

(b) Hass, H. T. And Maehr, M. L. (1965) *Two Experiments In The Concepts Of Self And The Reaction Of Others*, Journal Of Personality And Social Psychology Vol. 1 pp. 100-105.

(c) Videback, R. (1960) *Self Concept and The Reactions Of Others*, Society, Vol. 23 pp. 351-59, London.

a new meaning to these words Dalit Literature has labeled it to be a class of people which is supposedly required to bring about a change in the social, political and economic situation in the country<sup>16</sup> but still these words carry a social stigma and public self-awareness is also particularly high when one thinks that he or she is carrying a social stigma.

People's recollection of past occurrences can have a major impact on the way they deal with similar events in future. Past experience of success in social encounters make people to expect positive social experience in future too. On the other hand, painful and disgracing experience of the past moulds the future behavior of an individual to expect disgrace and humiliation.

'Dalits', who tend to wipe out their past, makes every possible effort not to be identified as inferior to caste-Hindus. Hiding their inner sense of helplessness, with a mask of swaggering bravado, they try to impress upon others their ability, competence and boldness at their place of work while any discussion on the issue related to the policy of reservation or other caste-matters make them uncomfortable and as a consequence they avoid such situations. Their past experience of caste occurrences which were naturally painful and disgracing, mould their future behavior in caste matters make them uncomfortable and as a consequence they avoid such matters of social stigma.

A social stigma refers to 'defect' in a person's social identity – negative information about the person that is known by others. Because stigmatized person is highly self-aware, he or she is sensitive to others' comments, real or imagined evaluation highly motivated to make as good an impression as possible and likely to feel socially anxious especially when under observation. Not only does the

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<sup>16</sup> Dangle, Arjun: Sunday Times of India, August 2, 1992.



possession of social stigma induce public self-awareness, it also makes people doubt that others will evaluate them favorably which further leads to social anxiety reducing their efficiency.

According to 'self-preservation' theory, social anxiety arises whenever people are motivated to make a particular impression on others but doubt that they will be able to do so, having expectations of negative social experiences. People who have had unsuccessful, punishing, awkward and otherwise aversive experiences in social settings in the past; may then greet the prospect of subsequent encounters with trepidation. Such experiences lead educated 'Dalit' to doubt that they can make the kind of impression on others that will result in desired reaction from them.

Viewed from 'social learning principle', classical conditioning occurs when people associate situations with positive or negative outcome<sup>17</sup>. Terrible aversive experience of the past, which India's ex-untouchables had to face lead them to expect adverse consequences in the future, and thus heightening the likelihood of social-anxiety.

## **Children of Dalits**

Public self-consciousness is also a related phenomenon if people of different hierarchy of caste-system are considered. Development of public self-consciousness starts right from childhood experiences. Children of highly publicly 'self-conscious' parents may learn to be publicly self-conscious through 'modelling-process'. Children who observe that parents are much concerned how

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<sup>17</sup>(a) Bandura, A. (1969) *Principles of Behavioural Modification*, Holt, New York.

(b) Bandura, A. (1977) *Self Efficacy: Towards a Unifying Theory of Behavioural Change*, Psychological Review 84, pp. 191-215.

they are evaluated by others are likely to learn to adopt greater self-scrutiny than the children of parents who are not obviously concerned with others' evaluation. One can imagine a child witnessing and then internalizing parents' expressed concerns about social evaluation. When parents often express concern with what neighbors, friends, family and co-workers think about the prestige of the parents' background, children may come to believe that it is important to consider others' perception and evaluation of oneself. No wonder children born of educated Dalits in the post independence era are excessively self-conscious, extremely shy, over sensitive to reference to caste and have tendency towards isolation. Heightened self-consciousness further adds to their already existing tendency towards isolation, defeating the efforts of the government to resolve the problem of isolation. They do not feel secure and comfortable in larger groups, which get magnified with the parents' advice who always infuse fear of larger groups in their children.

Before independence (and to some extent even today) the Untouchables experienced feelings of defilement, odium, aversion, and contempt, because he was considered 'unclean' ritually and not because he was really dirty. Untouchable meant a person engaged in abominably filthy occupation creating a psychological repulsion among 'cleaner' caste-Hindus. In free India, the relations between the Dalits and caste-Hindus have undergone a significant change at least overtly. The concept of pollution and defilement has been replaced by scientifically based concept of contamination of diseases which is equally transmitted (or not transmitted) by both Dalits and the caste-Hindus, but the wounded psyche of Dalits, which is still under the continued fear of caste-Hindu dominance, and manifests in Dalit children, making them extremely shy, highly sensitive,

profoundly insecure, prone to isolation, self depreciative, not confident of their ability and many other characteristics, not desirable for making a healthy society.

## **Self-Image and Dalits**

Self-concept, an important aspect of one's personality is the image of self that one tries to enhance or defend. It is subject to change and modifications throughout life. It changes as those with whom one identifies change or as the expectations of these others are altered. In general, once established it apparently provides a sense of personal continuity over space and time and is defended against alteration and insult. This self-image or identity either of a person or a local community embodies those characteristics which are identified as being like or unlike of other person or communities.

A man's self-concept, what he means to himself, determines to a great extent how he will act in terms of a given situation or in making a decision. It will determine in large measure the role behavior he will exhibit. He may, for example reject efforts to improve educational conditions as he sees them in terms of who he is and what others think of him.

For most part of his life, a person seeks to achieve personal and social identities, which are favorably recognized by others in his immediate area of, inter-action. The manner in which someone evaluates his identity, as a person who must achieve or not achieve certain societal goals, may be considered as his level of self-esteem in terms of praise or shame.

Apathy, powerlessness and lack of confidence in achieving change have been the characteristics of low caste members. They are now being modified under newly created self-image, which provides a new sense of personal worth and

organization of reality. Experience with new patterns of living effectively furnish new criteria for self-appraisal and have led to alteration of the self-image through these new experience and opportunities.

Individuals however are often torn between old and new practices between old and new ideas of what is or what is not acceptable as self-image. In case of an educated Dalit, the newly acquired self-concept is not concordant with illiterate or traditionally humble parents; in that case, the educated Dalit either succumbs to the pressure of parents or completely dissociates himself from them.

Caste-Hindus are often critical of an educated Dalit that he/she tends to forget his native village and the place he hails from and avoids visiting it. Avoidance behavior of this type is explainable on the basis of the discordance between village life clinging on to old values and newly acquired status of Dalit who has lost his old identity in the busy city life and twilight of cushy government job. He has to behave like an untouchable while in the village.

There is ample evidence that threat to 'Dalit identity' from caste-Hindu extremists also exist according to what Ambedkar described that the ultimate benefit to Dalits lies in staying away from the grip of Hinduism and as long as, "Brahminical social order is intact...they can never progress."<sup>18</sup>

Yet the commitment of a person or local communities to new ways of acting to rejecting former ways, and to acquiring new skills, constitutes the achievement of a new identity, which requires eradication of the former self. The concept of new social roles involves the display and decision-making and not the attitude of dependence on others.

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<sup>18</sup> Sardesai, Rajdeep. *Ambedkar's Frayed Legacy: Dalits Must Resist Hindu Militancy*. The Times of India, September 9, 1993.

People or local communities may change their behavior pattern but in order to feel that a change has occurred, they must be treated by caste-Hindus in a different manner, which is by and large evident, by its absence, and the low castes continue to be treated in the same way by higher castes directly or indirectly. Recognition of new identity and role of low caste people is crucial in maintaining and solidifying the identity changes, for it is impossible to play the roles appropriate to one's new identity in a social vacuum<sup>19</sup>. Legitimatization of new identities involves approval and praise by individuals and groups who possess sufficient social power in the form of authority and influence. Praise and acceptance of outsiders plays an important role in such change by helping to develop a new collective identity. On the other hand attempts to play new roles may be negated if others do not accord a person or community through role taking, the new self-image he is trying to cultivate.

It is evident from our account so far that oppression affected not only the outward circumstances of their lives but also their inner worlds as well. It proved impossible for Dalits to avoid internalizing society's valuation of themselves as worthless, fundamentally flawed, even sub-human; this has affected their human relationships as well as their religious life. *Dalit liberation has meant liberation from that kind of religiously imposed and religiously sanctioned degradation.* Near the end of the nineteenth century, when the modern Dalit movement began, Dalits were still stigmatized, segregated and uneducated, living in dire poverty and almost total dependence upon the higher castes, with little hope of sympathy or support from others. Since then as their movement has gained momentum, Dalits have developed four alternative strategies to attain their generally accepted goals of

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<sup>19</sup> Goed-Enough, W. H. (1963) *Co-Operation In Social Change: An Anthropological Approach In Community Development*. Russell Sage Foundation: New York.

*dignity, equality, justice, and respect*, which together may be seen as providing the substance of their liberation. The strategy which has had the most Dalit support has been the acquisition of political power, either as an end in itself, because of the prestige it confers, or as a means of achieving other ends for the Dalits. A second strategy has been to gain as much economic independence from the dominant castes as possible, again either as an end in itself or as a necessary prerequisite to gaining political power. The third strategy has been internal social reform, largely through acquiring an education and making lifestyle changes, in the hope of reducing prejudicial attitudes against them. Religious change has been another strategy used to change not just attitudes but self-image as well, and to forge new religious identities<sup>20</sup>.

Our effort in the next chapters will be to examine the nature of the fourth strategy adopted by Dalits to improve their social position. And how far this single strategy has proved effective in this endeavour.

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<sup>20</sup> Barbara R. Joshi, *Democracy In Search of Equality: Untouchable Politics and Indian Social Change*, Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Corporation, 1982, pp.123-8.

## Chapter II

### Buddhist Conversion of 14<sup>th</sup> October 1956

#### Central Issues and Salient Features

On the 14<sup>th</sup> October, 1956, Dr. Ambedkar took his *Diksha* at Nagpur in Maharashtra along with five hundred thousand Dalits, who all got converted to Buddhism on that day. This was one of the unique events that took place in the social history of post independent India,<sup>1</sup> leading to the largest one time mass conversion of a people.<sup>2</sup> Presently the ratio of Buddhist population to total population is 0.76 percent.

In the whole of India, the number of Buddhists went up from 180,823 in 1951 to 3,250,227 in 1961. The ratio of Buddhist population to total population was 0.05 in 1951 and 0.74 in 1961. The decadal percentage increase of Buddhists was as much as 1,670.71.<sup>3</sup>

This striking increase in the Buddhist population of India is due mainly to the conversion of Dalits which has been a historic event because of several factors. In this chapter an attempt has been made to put in proper perspective the how and why of this event. The conversion movement was initiated by Dr. Ambedkar.<sup>4</sup> To understand this event which occurred in 1956, one has to go back in time to certain incidents in Dr. Ambedkar's life.

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<sup>1</sup> Uttara Shastree (1996) *Religious Converts in India*; Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Narain A. K. and D. C. Ahir (eds.) *Dr. Ambedkar, Buddhism And Social Change*; B. R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi 1974; p.xi.

<sup>3</sup> 1961 Census of India.

<sup>4</sup> Uttara Shastree (1996) op.cit. no. 1

## **A Brief Life-Sketch of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar**

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was born at Mhow in central India on 14<sup>th</sup> April 1891. His father Ramji and grandfather Maloji both were in military service. When Bhimrao was five, he was sent to a Marathi school in Dapoli. Bhimrao entered the government high school, Satara, in 1900 in the 1<sup>st</sup> standard. Being an untouchable by birth, Dr. Ambedkar was forced to sit outside the class in the school. He could not mix with other boys or play with them. The untouchables were prohibited to learn Sanskrit. The Sanskrit teacher was adamant and did not teach Sanskrit to the untouchables. Ambedkar was forced to take Persian as the second language in the high school. The teachers never touched the notebooks of the untouchable students. Some of them did not even ask them to neither recite poems nor put any questions to them for fear of being polluted. Ambedkar had to face humiliation.

In 1904 the family shifted to Bombay and began to stay in a one room tenement in an old chawl at Parel. At that time Ambedkar was in the fourth standard. He first joined the Maratha high school, Parel. There being no concessions in this school, he joined Elphinstone high school, a government institute.

Ambedkar passed his matriculation exam in 1907. Krishnarao Arjun Keluskar a teacher of Ambedkar took a fancy for Ambedkar and presented him with a copy of the life of Gautam Buddha.

Ambedkar joined the Elphinstone College. The Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad of Baroda gave him a monthly scholarship of twenty five rupees. Ambedkar passed his B.A. examination in 1913 with English and Persian as his subjects.



Ambedkar accepted an invitation from Maharaja of Baroda to serve in his state. The higher offices were manned by orthodox upper caste Hindus. The ideas of pollution by touch were so strong that even the peons in his office used to throw the office files at him lest they should be polluted. He could not get residential accommodation. The social conditions were so unfavourable and unbearable for him to continue in the service. He, therefore, decided to resign from the office.

In July 1913, he joined Colombia University as a Gaekwad scholar. He was the first Mahar to study in a foreign university. In Colombia he stayed in a cosmopolitan club. He could move there with a status of equality. Life in the Colombia University was a revelation to him and it enlarged his mental vision.

In June 1915, Ambedkar obtained his M.A degree for his thesis, "Ancient Indian commerce". In May 1916, he read a paper on "The Castes in India, their mechanism, genesis and development" in the Anthropology seminar of Dr. Goldenweiser. It was published in the Indian anti-quarry in May 1917.

In June 1916 Ambedkar submitted his thesis for the degree of Ph. D., entitled "National Dividend for India: A historic and analytical study". Dr. Ambedkar left Colombia University to join the London School of Economics and Political Science. He returned to India after spending a year in London working on a thesis for the M.Sc. (Economics) degree. The return before completion of the work was necessitated by the termination of the scholarship granted to him by Maharaja Sayajirao of Baroda.

In July 1917, he was appointed military secretary to the Maharaja of Baroda with a view to being groomed for the post of the states finance minister. Again, he could not manage to get a residence because of his untouchable identity.

He was treated by his staff and peons as a leper. Drinking water was not available in the office. He realised that even with his personal achievements he could not soften the prejudices of the caste Hindus. He left Baroda on account of the ill treatment meted out to him because of his low caste. Dr. Ambedkar returned to Bombay in 1917.

On 31<sup>st</sup> January 1920, Dr. Ambedkar started a weekly paper, *Mookanayak* (leader of the dumb), to champion the cause of the lower castes in India. The conferences of the depressed classes held at Nagpur (1918) and Kolhapur (21<sup>st</sup> March 1920) under the Presidentship of Shahu Maharaj were attended by Dr. Ambedkar. This was the first organised attempt for the uplift of the untouchables.

Dr. Ambedkar rejoined the London School of Economics and also entered Gray's Inn to qualify as barrister in September 1920. In London he met E. S. Montagu, Secretary of State for India in respect of the grievances of the untouchables in India. After his return to India Dr. Ambedkar convened a meeting on 9<sup>th</sup> March 1924, in Bombay to consider the problems of the depressed classes. Following the discussions Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha (Association for the welfare of the depressed classes) was formed on 20<sup>th</sup> July, 1924.

Dr. Ambedkar's mission was to liberate and emancipate the downtrodden classes from the yoke of Hindu social slavery. He found the Hindu religion incapable of giving either spiritual solace or social equality to the depressed and oppressed, he decided in 1935 to renounce Hinduism. Hence, a search for new religion began, and ultimately, he found solace in the teachings of the Buddha. How the monster of Untouchability followed the untouchable at every step is very well illustrated by the life story of Dr. Ambedkar himself.

### **To Recapitulate His Experiences**

- 1) At school at Satara, he was made to sit outside the classroom. Many a time he had to go without water, not because there was no water but because he being an untouchable, he had no right to drink from the common source;
- 2) As a man of learning and high official in the Baroda state in 1917, he was subjected to inhuman treatment; drinking water was not available to him in the office, his subordinates kept distance, even the peons fearful of pollution threw files and papers on to him from a distance;
- 3) As professor in Bombay in 1918-20, he was treated as pariah by the caste Hindu professors and was not allowed to drink water from the pot kept in the professor's common room.

This being the case of Dr. Ambedkar, who was a highly educated person and living in a metropolitan city like Bombay, it is not difficult to imagine the plight of the poor and helpless untouchables living in the smaller towns and villages. His struggle for the liberation of the untouchables was launched at Mahad on 20<sup>th</sup> March 1927. Here, under his leadership, the untouchables for the first time asserted their human right by drinking water from a forbidden tank. The second important battle was fought at Nasik, which lasted for more than five years from March 1930 to October 1935. The object this time was to secure the right of entry into the Hindu temples. However, the long drawn temple entry movement failed to bend the orthodox Hindus who refused to see reason. This convinced Dr. Ambedkar that the decaying and decadent structure of Hindu society was beyond repair and that the salvation of the downtrodden lies only in being independent of the religion which has given birth to the curse of caste and Untouchability.

His first major act was the Mahad movement of 1927. This movement is significant for two reasons: firstly, because it demonstrated the people's will to exercise their common civic right to draw water from the Chawdar water-tank; and secondly, it gave expression to their ideological revolt against the notorious and hateful *Manusmriti* which was a law of injustice, slavery, inequality, inhumanity. The conference at Mahad culminated in the public and ceremonious burning of the *Manusmriti*, after two thousand years of its unchallenged sway.

According to Kharat, "the Ram Mandir highlighted two processes-on the one hand the touchables were not prepared to treat the untouchables as human beings, extend them equality, justice and brotherliness. On the other hand the untouchables also, for the first time, were not prepared to remain under the stranglehold of the higher castes". And all these were campaigns of protest carried on the strength of their own organization and for the first time the untouchables had a leader from among themselves, one who had himself undergone the sufferings and humiliations along with the men of his community, and who had seen his people suffer all kinds of disabilities. Given such a leadership, self-confidence and self-assurance welled up in the hearts of thousands of untouchables regarding their capacity to fight in an organized way and they started looking up to Dr. Ambedkar with faith and adoration.

## **Gandhi-Ambedkar Debate**

Both Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar wanted to eradicate Untouchability. Instead of both of them taking a position that would be complementary to either of them, their positions differed in achieving their common end of obliteration of Untouchability.

The basic difference in both their approaches was casteism itself. Gandhi wanted the class structure of castes graded as they are traditionally, minus the problem of Untouchability. Dr. Ambedkar envisaged a society without any caste barrier. For Dr. Ambedkar removal of Untouchability was his topmost priority. For Gandhi, removal of Untouchability was one of his many programmes. Gandhi's attempt was to ennoble any kind of menial work and he christened the outcastes as 'Harijans'. Dr. Ambedkar did not like the term at all. He also did not like any patronage on sympathetic or compassionate grounds. His approach was that of a struggle, whereas Gandhi's was that of reform. It appears that while Gandhi was an idealist with regards to Untouchability, Dr. Ambedkar was certainly a practical realist. When he realised this impossibility, he embraced Buddhism.

## **A Summary of Dr. Ambedkar's Argument**

Political and constitutional reform cannot succeed unless it is preceded by social reform aimed at the eradication of Untouchability. But social reform can only mean abolition of caste, because Untouchability is a *defining feature* of caste. In reality, caste cannot be *reformed* (contrary to Gandhi's hope) only annihilated. And the annihilation of caste implies the abolition of Hindu ideology particularly as it is formulated in the Shastras and Smritis. Caste is fundamentally 'a state of mind' (he meant this both collectively and individually) which is systematized in Hindu scriptures; and while endogamy is what he calls the 'mechanism' of caste, it is religious dogma that prohibits intermarriage, and therefore ultimately it is the religious values that must be destroyed.

In contrast, at around this time Gandhi did not want to abolish caste as such, but to reform it according to an ideal model. But Dr. Ambedkar severely

criticized Gandhi for his view that caste was essentially a division of labour and that inequality and Untouchability were extraneous distortions. Dr. Ambedkar wished to replace the religion of rules with true religion, the religion of principles, which is the basis for civic government. These principles, liberty, equality and fraternity are true religion. He maintained, true Religion is the foundation of society, which he found in Buddhism.

For him, the bases of religion are *values* the values which hold a society together. Concepts of the supernatural were not the essentially important point of Dr. Ambedkar. Indeed, he came to see supernaturalism as irrational and irrelevant to true religion. However, one significant way in which these sets of values differ from each other is that for Dr. Ambedkar, the democratic values are Universalist in the sense that they apply equally to everyone in principle, for all humans are individuals and all humans have equal rights and obligations, and all humans deserve the opportunity to discover their own true talents. In contrast, the Hindu values are particularistic. There is one set of rules for Brahmins and another for untouchables. In the case of the caste system in India, rules apply to particular people in particular situations. Different categories of people must marry only into a specific sub-caste, must have different occupations, must live in different parts of the village, must wear different clothes, and so on.

## **The Yeola Declaration**

The stage was now set for his epoch-making speech at Yeola in the Nasik district on the 13<sup>th</sup> October, 1935, when he announced his determination to renounce Hinduism. "It is the inequality in Hinduism", he said, "that compels me to quit Hinduism. I had the misfortune of my being born with the stigma of

Untouchability; that is not my fault. But I will not die as a Hindu; this is within my power.”<sup>5</sup>

Dr Ambedkar convened a conference at Bombay in May-June, 1936, to sound the people’s reaction to the call he had given at Yeola for renouncing Hinduism. The burden of his famous speech on *Mukti Kon Pathe?* (Which Way to Emancipation?) was:

*“If you must gain self-respect,  
Change your religion;  
If you desire independence,  
Change your religion,  
If you wish to create a society that ensures  
Co-operation and brotherhood,  
Change your religion;  
And if you wish to make happy the world in which  
You live,  
Change your religion!”*<sup>6</sup>

## **Dr. Ambedkar’s Philosophy of Religion**

Dr. Ambedkar saw religion not as a means to spiritual salvation of individual souls, but as a ‘social doctrine’ for establishing the righteousness between man and man. Dr. Ambedkar’s philosophy of religion does not mean either theology or religion. For Dr. Ambedkar, “philosophy is nothing but a standard to measure the conduct of man”.<sup>7</sup> Dr. Ambedkar took “Religion to mean

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<sup>5</sup> Khairmoday. C.B., 1985. *Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, Vol.6*, Bombay, Maharashtra Rajya Sahitya Sanskriti Mandal.

<sup>6</sup> K N Kadam, (ed.) *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar and the Significance of His Movement: A Chronology*, Bombay, Popular Prakshan, 1991, p108.

<sup>7</sup> Keer, Dhananjay. *Dr. Ambedkar: Life And Mission*; Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edn. 1962, p.17.

the propounding of an ideal scheme of divine governance the aim and objective of which is to make the social order in which men live a moral order".<sup>8</sup>

The religious revolution as brought about by Buddha influenced people's minds far and wide in India and else where, and it was emphasized that the belief in God was not essentially an integral part of their religion. Dr. Ambedkar took this view as true in the form of the Buddha's *Dhamma*, because nobody had seen God; God was unknown, a mere metaphysical speculation. Nobody could prove that God had created the Universe, though it was generally held to be true. The universe had evolved, and was not created by any God or cosmic being. The belief in god had only ended in creating superstitions and therefore, for Dr. Ambedkar, a religion, if based on God, was not worth having for man.<sup>9</sup>

The chief vehicle for transmitting and interpreting the new faith of Dr. Ambedkar is his book, '*The Buddha and His Dhamma*'. It was written in English. It is a rationalized biography of the Buddha and contains a selection from Buddhist Pali works. Dr. Ambedkar's aim was to produce a 'Bible' and so it has been continued to be for his followers. No attempt has been made to maintain a distinction between the translation of the original passage and Dr. Ambedkar's commentary on it.<sup>10</sup> However, in Hindi translation of the volume, Bhadanta Ananda Kausalyayana, has identified the original texts from which Dr. Ambedkar drew and observes, that it represents a 'new orientation, but not a distortion' and that all central doctrines of Buddhism are present in it.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: *Writings and Speeches, Vol.3*, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1987, p.6.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* vol.11. 1992, p.251.

<sup>10</sup> Macy, Joanna Rogers and Eleanor Zelliot, "*Tradition and Innovation in Contemporary Indian Buddhism*", In A. K. Narayan (ed.), Delhi, 1980, p.135.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*



Two characteristic of the Buddha's teachings were praised by Dr. Ambedkar most, the rationality on one hand and the social message on the other. He describes 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 put forth deliberately and with a knowledge of opposing views, the doctrine of salvation to be found here, in this life, in inward change of heart to be brought about by the practice of self-culture and self-control".<sup>12</sup>

P.L. Lakshmi Narasu<sup>13</sup> has also written much to the same effect: "The dictum accepted in all schools of Buddhism is that nothing can be accepted as the teachings of the master, which is not in strict accord with reason". Thus, in fighting the ideas of god, soul and *avatara* upon which, they believe, the caste system rests, Dr. Ambedkar and his followers appeal in the last analysis to 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>14</sup>

The idea that all religions are true and equally good was positively and demonstratively a wrong belief, according to Dr. Ambedkar. The study of comparative religion had broken the claim and arrogance of revealed religions as being the only true and good religions. He observed, "While it is true that comparative religion has abrogated the capricious distinction between true and false religions based on purely arbitrary and prior considerations, it has brought in its wake some false notions about religion. The harmful one, is the one I have mentioned, namely, that all religions are equally good and that there is no necessity of discriminating between them. Nothing can be a greater error than this. Religion

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<sup>12</sup> Dr. Babasaheb ambedkar: vol.11, 1992 pp.131-2.

<sup>13</sup> Narasu. P. Lakshmi, *The Essence Of Buddhism*, Madras, 1907, p.vii.

<sup>14</sup> Macy. Op.cit. No. 10, p.135.

is an institution or an influence like all social influences and institutions it may help or it may harm a society which is in its grip”.<sup>15</sup> This view may well be supported by the results each religion has produced in its social and national life. A religion can form or disrupt nations, create inhuman institutions and barbarous customs, cause wars, persecutions, rebellions and revolutions; but it can also bring freedom, peace and happiness to millions of people. A religion may be foe to progress, science and art; but also a friend to innovation and good civilization or cultural heritage. All this can be testified after reading the histories of world religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity as to what extent they have done good or harm to mankind.

According to Dr. Ambedkar, religions could produce strange contradictory results. How can, then, they be true and equally good? Every religion has given its own divine scheme of social governance and moral ideals, which have produced different models of conduct. The study of comparative religion has not given any heed to this aspect of religions. Moreover, all religions are not theistic; some are non-theistic; and with regard to the nature of soul, god, worship, prayer, rituals and ceremonies, there are basic differences between religions. Although religions are many; but to say they are equally true and good, is the most pernicious idea, and that is why, Dr. Ambedkar did not entertain it in his philosophy of religion.

It is generally held by theistic religions that God is an essential element of a religion; but to Dr. Ambedkar, it is not. In his view, the religion of the savage society has no idea of God, i.e. in the savage society there was religion without god. How, then, God became fused in religion? He observed, “It may be that the idea of god had its origin in the worship of the Great Man in society, the hero

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<sup>15</sup> Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: vol. 3, op.cit. p.24.

giving rise to theism- with its faith in its living God. It may be that the idea of God came into existence as a result of the purely philosophical speculation upon the problem as to who created life – giving rise to Deism- with its belief in God as Architect of the universe. In any case, the idea of God is not integral to religion.”<sup>16</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar did not accept the divine social governance under the *Chaturya-varna*, because in it, there was no choice of free avocation, no economic independence and no economic security. It had developed a hierarchical order of different castes resulting in inequalities of severe nature. In fact, this order devitalized men, particularly the Shudras. It was a process of sterilization. It denied wealth, education and arms to its people. It did not fulfill the test of social unity. This divine social governance of dissected society in fragments, dissociated work from interest, disconnected intelligence from labour, expropriated rights of man to interests vital of life. It also prevented society from mobilizing resources for common action in the hour of danger. Can it satisfy the test of social utility? Asked Dr. Ambedkar. No, not all. Therefore, he rejected the divine social order (*Chatur-Varna*) on the basis of its denial of liberty, equality and fraternity.

The idea of infallibility of religious texts as the source of divine authority was also rejected by Dr. Ambedkar on the ground that it prevented people from using the method of free enquiry and examination of the efficacy of religious beliefs and practices. When he saw that the Hindu under the sanctions of Varna system hesitated in the matters of inter-dining and inter-caste marriages, he found its main reason in the infallibility of the Hindu Shastras. For the Shastras, prescribed such rules as to prevent the Hindu from inter-dining and inter-caste marriages. The people were afraid of divine wrath if they tried to override the

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* p.35.

divinity and sanctity of the Shastras. The infallibility of the Shastras did not permit the use of critical reason in social matters. Therefore, Dr. Ambedkar emphasized, “The real remedy is destroy the belief in the sanctity of the Shastras.. Make every man and women free from the thralldom of the Shastras cleanse their minds of the pernicious notions founded on the Shastras, and he or she will inter-dine and inter-marry...” In other words, for Dr. Ambedkar, nothing was infallible, and everything must be subject to examination or to critical reason, even the Vedas on the point of authority and divinity were not final to him. It was really a riddle how the Vedas or the Hindu Shastras were considered and declared to be ‘Infallible’.

Dr. Ambedkar did not believe in the theory that the sole aim of an individual’s life is to attain Moksha, i.e., the salvation of soul. He ruled out the existence of any ‘Eternal Soul’, the main doctrine of Hinduism. The idea is that the eternal soul goes from life of life because of its karmas. The soul transmigrates from one birth to another till it attains Moksha. The triangular theory of soul, karma and transmigration, has become the main thesis of Hinduism. Dr. Ambedkar did not accept this view, because he believed in the theory of ‘*an-atta*’ (No Soul) of Buddhism. Everything is impermanent. How can there be a permanent soul, then? Moreover, the Hindu idea of soul is based on the retributive theory of karma as propounded by the Hindu Shastras was to enable the state or the society to escape responsibility for the bad condition of the poor and the lowly. Having faith in the test of justice for judging a religion, apparently, Dr. Ambedkar rejected the metaphysical entities like soul and its transmigration.

Agreeing with the Buddhist analysis, Dr. Ambedkar believed in human mind which is quite different from soul. Mind functions; but soul does not function. The belief in eternal soul is unprofitable, and it only ends in creating

superstitions. The entire structure of Brahmanic religion is based on Atman, which Dr. Ambedkar rejected as unknown and unseen. The belief in the permanent soul did not satisfy the intellect of Dr. Ambedkar. Since, for him God is not an essential element of a religion, so is the case with soul. Therefore, the questions did not arise that an individual's aim of life must be to seek the salvation of soul through the grace of God as some Indian philosophers like Ramanuja and others thought of.

With regard to the relation of morality of God and religion Dr. Ambedkar had his own view, and he did not agree to the idea that morality was an out come of the belief in God or it was an integral part of religion. According to him, though the relation between God and morality was not quite integral, the relation between religion and morality was. As a matter of truth, morality has no place in religion, because today religion in general has come to connect nothing but belief in God, belief in soul, worship of God, curing of erring soul, propitiating God by prayers, ceremonies, sacrifices etc. In fact, morality in theistic religion is not effective, for the main things in them are the prayers, worship, rituals ceremonies and sacrifices. From another view-point, as Dr. Ambedkar observed, "Both religion and morality are connected with the same elemental facts of human existence – namely life, death, birth and marriage. Religion concentrates these life processes while morality furnishes rules for their preservation. Religion in consecrating the elemental facts and processes of life came to consecrating the elemental facts and processes of life came to consecrate also the rules laid down by society for their preservation. Looked at from this point, it is easily explained why the bond between religion and morality took place. It was more intimate and more natural than the bond between religion and God.

In Dr. Ambedkar's view, morality comes in only wherein man comes in relation to man, and if a religion does not believe in the existence of God, morality takes its place as we see in the Buddha's Dhamma. "In Dhamma, there is no place for prayers, pilgrimages, rituals, ceremonies or sacrifices. Morality is the essence of Dhamma. Without it, there is not Dhamma". "Morality in Dhamma arises from the direct necessity for man to love man. It does not require the sanction of God. It is not please God that man has to be moral. It is for his won good that man has to love man". It is evident that Dr. Ambedkar linked non-theistic religion like Buddhism with morality as an integral part of it. In his view, every theistic religion preaches morality; but morality is not the root of it. It only teaches that be good to your neighbor, because you are both children of god or the men of Allah or Ishwara.

Dr. Ambedkar has applied the test of justice and the test of social utility to judge the relevance of a religion in the modern age. It is really desirable to put religion on its trial from time to time.

It is true, as Dr. Ambedkar recognized that religion, as a social force, cannot be ignored. Besides, religion stands for a scheme of divine governance, though non-existent, yet it is real as it can be found in the case of Hindu social order. Dr. Ambedkar's test of justice and utility consist the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, a trinity of principles. For Dr. Ambedkar Hinduism does not recognize and practice them. He asserted, "...Hinduism is inimical to equality, antagonistic to liberty and opposed to fraternity". Therefore, he renounced it and took refuge in the Dhamma of Lord Buddha.

For Dr. Ambedkar, religion is a social force, and is essential for man and society. He said, "True religion is the foundation of society, the basis on which all

true civil government rests, and both their sanction". But the same time, Dr. Ambedkar condemned a religion of rules and preferred a religion of principles, "which alone could lay claim to being a true religion." For him, the distinction between rules and principles was real and most significant. He drew a fine distinction between both kinds of religions as follows:

"Rules are practical; they are habitual ways of doing things according to prescription. But principles are intellectual; they are useful methods of judging things. Rules seek to tell an agent just what course of action to pursue. Principles do not prescribe a specific course of action. Rules, like cooking recipes, do tell just what to do and how to do it. A principle, such as that of justice, supplies a main head by reference to which he is to consider the bearings of his desires and purposes, it guides him in his thinking by suggesting to him the important consideration, which he should bear in mind. This difference between rules and principles makes the acts done in pursuit of them different in quality and in content. Doing what is said to be good by virtue of a rule and doing good in the light of a principle are two different things. The principle may be wrong but the act is conscious and responsible. The rule may be right but the act is mechanical. A religious act may not be a correct act but must at least be a responsible act. To permit of this responsibility, religion must mainly be a matter of – principles only. It cannot be a matter of rules. The moment it degenerates into rules, it ceases to be religion, and it kills responsibility which is the essence of a truly religious act".

It is quite evident that Dr. Ambedkar's philosophy of religion stands for the necessity of religion in society. Over a long period of social development man had really become a 'religious being'. At present, religion gives us some secular ideals, and its power depends upon its power to confer material benefits to mankind.

Although, Dr. Ambedkar realized that “to ignore religion was to ignore a live wire”, he, at the same time, emphasized that religion must not be multitude of commands and prohibitions, because such religion tends to deprive the moral life freedom and spontaneity and tends to reduce it to a more or less anxious and servile conformity to externally imposed rules. He also disliked a religion as a law or as a legalized class ethics as it can find in some of the existing religions.

## **The Choice of Buddhism**

We shall now try and understand why Dr. Ambedkar converted to Buddhism? In this endeavor, we shall be largely concerned with some of the essential grounds for his choice of Buddhism.

Some critics of Dr. Ambedkar say that he embraced Buddhism towards the evening of his life in a desperate state of mind because of his unhappiness with the working of the constitution, and his failure in politics.<sup>17</sup> Others say that “he became frustrated by the slow pace of change in social-setup and blurred the real issues by turning to Buddhism”.<sup>18</sup> There can be nothing farther from truth than these statements. Such critics conveniently gloss over the fact that Dr. Ambedkar had taken a solemn vow as early as 1935 to renounce Hinduism. The fact that he took more than twenty years to do so proves beyond doubt that he took this crucial step only after careful and dispassionate consideration. As it was not a sudden step on his part, the question of embracing Buddhism “out of frustration” or escapism did not arise, the more fundamental question that ought to be asked is as to why he embraced Buddhism and not any other religion.

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<sup>17</sup> Kuber, W. N. 1973. *Dr. Ambedkar: A Critical Study*, Peoples Publishing House, New Delhi. P.131.

<sup>18</sup> Dalmia, Yashodhara, 1974. “*Scheduled Castes A View From Below*”. The Times of India. 15 December 1974.



When Dr. Ambedkar announced his intention to renounce Hinduism, the Muslims, Christians and Sikhs promptly tried to induce him to embrace their respective religions. The reason why Dr. Ambedkar was not attracted by either Islam or Christianity was two fold. Firstly, he was not inclined to go out of the basic Indian culture. Dr. Ambedkar said “conversion to Islam or Christianity will denationalise the depressed classes”.<sup>19</sup> In other words, he was in favour of an indigenous religion, a product of the Indian soil. Secondly, he found on scrutiny that neither Islam nor Christianity had been able to do away with the evil of caste, the primary reason for the down trodden to renounce Hinduism.

Dr. Ambedkar was not inclined even towards Sikhism. He found on close scrutiny that the social equality in Sikhism was confined to the four-walls of the Gurudwaras only. Beyond that, the Sikhs were no better than the Hindus so far as caste distinctions were concerned.

Finally Dr. Ambedkar chose Buddhism of his own volition after making an in-depth study of the Dhamma. He preferred Buddhism because he found the religion of the Buddha rational, scientific and epitome of morality, liberty, equality and fraternity. He also found that Buddha can raise the down-trodden to the highest level as it has done in the past. In 1950 Dr. Ambedkar made his position clear regarding the excellence of Buddhism over other religions. In a press conference in Bombay on 5<sup>th</sup> may, 1950 he said “I am definitely in favour of Buddhism. The principles of Buddhism are eternal, universal, egalitarian, rational, ethical and logical.”<sup>20</sup> It seems that the following angles, individually and together helped Dr. Ambedkar to decide on his final choice. They are: emancipation of untouchables from caste society; the universal, egalitarian and democratic nature of Buddhist

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<sup>19</sup> Patwardhan, Sunanada; *Change Among India's Harijans* p. 132.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

religion, and the Buddhist religion as a part of Indian culture; and the pragmatic angle.

## **Pilgrimage to Buddhism**

In the year 1943, he was found visiting the sacred Buddhist shrines and discussing his plan for the revival of Buddhism in India. In November 1945, a conference was held at Ahmedabad and its spacious *pandal* was called Buddha Nagar. And in 1946, when Dr. Ambedkar established the first educational institution in Bombay he named it 'Siddhartha College' after the personal name of the Buddha. Symbols as these indicated the trend of his mind and worth a writing on the wall for his follower. So they sought advice from him as to how best to understand and follow the marvelous Dhamma. In response to their persistence request, in 1948, Dr. Ambedkar got reprinted P. Lakshmi Narasu's book "*The Essence of Buddhism*" and recommended it for the study to the would-be Buddhist.

In 1950, it became perfectly clear that embracing Buddhism by Dr. Ambedkar was a matter of time only. In that year, he asked his follower to celebrate the Buddha Jayanti. In the celebration in Delhi, he himself participated. Same year he contributed an article to the may number of the Maha Bodhi journal of Calcutta under the title of Buddha and the future of his religion. Summarizing his thoughts about the future of Buddhism he said:

"A true religion is that which consists of the following four characteristics:

- (i) Religion, in the sense of morality, must therefore remain the governing principle in every society.
- (ii) Religion, if it is to function, must be in accord with reason which is merely another name for science.

(iii) Its moral code must recognize the fundamental tenets of liberty, equality and fraternity.

(iv) Religion must not sanctify or ennoble poverty.”

“Is there any religion which satisfies all these tests? So far as I know the only religion which satisfies all these test is Buddhism. In other words, Buddhism is the only religion which the world can have.”<sup>21</sup>

In May 1950, Dr. Ambedkar went to Sri Lanka to participate as a special invitee, in the first conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhist (W. F. B.) held at Kandy. In May 1954, he spent two weeks in Burma at the time of the Buddha Jayanti celebration and studied the Buddhist way of life in the land of the pagodas. In December 1954, he again visited Burma. This time he participated in the 3<sup>rd</sup> conference of the world fellowships of the Buddhist. After the conference he spent a week as a guest of an Indian friend, Dr. R. L. Soni. It was there that Dr. Ambedkar resolve to come to the fold of Buddhism in 1956.

On his return, Dr. Ambedkar concentrated all his attention on his plan for the conversion ceremony. In the meanwhile, he completed his monumental treatise on Buddhism, the Buddha and his Dhamma, in which he reinterpreted the Dhamma to show that it can amply meet the requirement of modern men. His emphasis is on the social gospel of the Buddha. According to him, to maintain purity in life is Dhamma; to reach perfection in life is Dhamma; to give up craving is Dhamma; to believe that all things are impermanent is Dhamma; to believe that karma is the instrument of moral order is Dhamma. It breaks down barriers between man and man, it teaches that “worth” and not birth is the measure of man; as it promotes

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<sup>21</sup> Ahir, D. C., 1982, *Dr. Ambedkar on Buddhism*, People's Education Society, Bombay.

equality between man and man, and also between man and woman. In brief, Dhamma teaches equality in all respects. It is all embracing and for the entire humanity.

He embraced Buddhism on 14<sup>th</sup> October 1956. Verily, it was the day of deliverance for Dr. Ambedkar and millions of his followers. After the great event was over Dr. Ambedkar, addressing the vast gathering said in an emotional voice “I started the movement of renouncing the Hindu religion in 1935 and since then I have been continuing struggle. This conversion has given me enormous satisfaction and pleasure unimaginable. I feel as if I have been liberated from hell.”<sup>22</sup>

In addition, he also administered to them the *twenty-two vows* which he had specially prepared to ensure that his followers renounce their old religion fully and become good Buddhists. The *twenty-two vows*, prescribed by Dr. Ambedkar for Buddhist converts meant to give them a separate identity. This is unique in the sense that it was prescribed in the Indian context.

### **The Twenty- Two Vows**

- (1) I shall not recognise Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesh as gods, nor shall I worship them.
- (2) I shall not recognise Rama and Krishna as gods, nor shall I worship them.
- (3) I shall not recognise Gowri and Ganpati as gods nor shall I worship them.
- (4) I do not believe in the theory of incarnation of god.
- (5) I do not consider the Buddha as the incarnation of Vishnu.

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<sup>22</sup> Ahir, D. C., 1982, Op.cit. No. 21, p. 35

- (6) I shall not perform *shraddha* for my ancestors, nor shall I give offerings to god.
- (7) I shall not do anything that is detrimental to Buddhism.
- (8) I shall not perform any religious rite through the agency of a Brahmin.
- (9) I believe in the principle that all human beings are equal.
- (10) I shall endeavor to establish equality.
- (11) I shall follow the eight-fold path of the Buddha.
- (12) I shall observe the ten *parimittas* enunciated by the Buddha.
- (13) I shall be compassionate to all living beings and I shall nurture them with care.
- (14) I shall not steal.
- (15) I shall not lie.
- (16) I shall not commit adultery.
- (17) I shall not take liquor.
- (18) I shall strive to lead my life according to the three principles of Buddhism, i.e., *gyan*, *sheel* and *karuna*.
- (19) I hereby reject my old religion Hinduism which is detrimental to the prosperity of humankind which discriminates between man and man and accept Buddhism.
- (20) I fully believe that Buddhism is *saddhamma*.
- (21) I believe that I am reborn now.

(22) I pledge to conduct myself hereafter in accordance with Buddha's Dhamma.

The twenty-two vows which Dr. Ambedkar prescribed look superfluous to the onlooker. But when we connect these vows to the context of mass conversion we would be convince that it was necessary. Of these special vows, the first eighteen vows require the initiates into Buddhism not to worship the Hindu gods and goddesses, not to regard the Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu, not to perform the traditional Hindu rites for the death, and not to employ the Brahmin priests for any rites and ceremonies. The next two vows lay emphasis on equality of all human beings. The vows from eleven to eighteen call upon the new initiates into Buddhism to practice the noble eight-fold path and the ten *paramitas* and to lead a life in which right knowledge, right conduct and compassion are harmoniously interwoven. The last four vows practically sum up all the vows. These vows enjoins upon the new comer to renounce Hinduism because it is based on inequality and adopt Buddhism as his religion; to formulate believe that the Dhamma of the Buddha is the true religion ; to believe that he is experiencing a spiritual rebirth ; and to solemnly declare and affirm that hereafter he will lead his life according to the teachings of the Buddha.

To counter the evils of the then existing Hindu society, Dr. Ambedkar evolved twenty-two vows, and made people realise that living in Buddhism is being 'death' to Hinduism. These vows constitute more of a sociological pedagogy than denouncing Hindu theology and avowing to enter the portals of Buddhist ideology. The sequence in which the vows are arranged is in fact disarrayed. It is not known whether Dr. Ambedkar deliberately kept these in this pattern, or if they

were in the order of his spontaneous thoughts. Let us consider them in the following sequence:

The first five vows are negation of Hindu deities. Dr. Ambedkar, by making his followers deny these five precepts, makes all the people realise that Buddhism has nothing to do with Hindu beliefs. The eighth vow is to show that the office of the priesthood to perform rites any kind is no more needed. Hence first five and the eight vow marks the total severance of the Dalits from Hinduism. This could best be effected only by making them take on oath or vow to this effect and that Dr. Ambedkar got accomplished.

The sixth vow is regarding the concept and meaning of death. In the traditional Hindu belief the soul of a person leaves that body to be born again. But for a Buddhist it is *Parinibbana*, i.e., total extinguishing or blowing out. There is no soul and therefore there is no rebirth of that soul. Now in the twenty-first vow a Buddhist is reborn-a new life in Buddhism.

The nine and the tenth vows are in line with the principle of equality the outcast have been fighting for since the time Dr. Ambedkar returned from his higher studies abroad. They wanted equality of social status, which was possible in Buddhism. Having accepted Buddhism, they have attained it. In Buddhism as we know all are equal and so are the converts. Having attained it, now it was the new responsibility of all the converts Buddhist to endeavor to established equality.

Thirteen to seventeen vows are relating to the social ethics that is badly needed in any society. Therefore he had included the clauses of being compassionate, not to steal, not to utter lies, and not to take liquor.

Eighteenth vow is striving to lead a life according to the three principles of Buddhism - *prajna*, *sila* and *karuna*. Here Dr. Ambedkar is introducing the lofty ideals of Buddhism.

The nineteenth vow ought to be a solemn oath of rejection of Hinduism and acceptance of Buddhism. The remaining vows could have been in this order: twentieth vow, eleventh vow, twelfth vow, twenty-second vow and the seventh vow. These vows are very important as the Dalit converts of that time were an ignorant mass. These words must have instilled great joy to understand what they were doing as they were taking the vows.

On the whole, Dr. Ambedkar with his astute wisdom included these vows to be taken by a converts at the time of diksha. These vow marks a separate identity for the Buddhist, simple and straight. The movement grew over the years. A Buddhist booklet mentions: "Within exactly 52 days of his conversion into Buddhism, Dr. Ambedkar passed away on the 6<sup>th</sup> December, 1956. This was a terrible calamity, but the followers of Dr. Ambedkar faced it with great courage and went ahead with the conversion movement with redoubled vigor... the Buddhist society of India decided to continue the conversion movement and the masses responded to it with an enthusiasm... many conversion ceremonies were held in different parts of India to spread the conversion movement and the following are noteworthy in recent time:

- (1) The conversion ceremony was held in Bombay on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1969;
- (2) Gorakhpur ceremony on 14<sup>th</sup> April 1970;
- (3) The Gazipur ceremony on the 18<sup>th</sup> april1970;
- (4) The Mirzapur ceremony on 7<sup>th</sup> may 1970;



- (5) The Sarnath ceremony on 29<sup>th</sup> may 1970;
- (6) The Calcutta ceremony on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1970;
- (7) The Patna ceremony on 13<sup>th</sup> June 1971;
- (8) The Allahabad ceremony on 20<sup>th</sup> November 1971;
- (9) The Basti ceremony on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1972...<sup>23</sup>

There have been subsequently many more conversions over the past decades. The conversion movement is still going on unabated. Even in the last decade the Deccan Herald of 12<sup>th</sup> august 1990 reported the conversion of 10 lakhs Dalits to Buddhism in Uttar Pradesh. What started off at Nagpur on 14<sup>th</sup> October 1956 could be called a religious fission- breaking up from Hinduism and then on we see a spate of religious fusion- converging of many converts into Buddhism all over India.

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<sup>23</sup> *Bodhisattva Ambedkar's Patriotic Call*. The Buddhist Society of India, Hyderabad, 1978, pp. 17-8.

## **CHAPTER: III**

### **Liberation and Identity Formation of Buddhists**

Today, there are nearly six million Buddhists in India. The Indian Buddhists can now be conveniently divided into four distinct groups. Firstly there are survivals from the Buddhist period. Secondly there are ethnic overlaps from the neighboring countries. The third category is represented by those who are attracted towards Buddhism as a result of the missionary movement spearheaded by the Maha-Bodhi Society. The followers of Dr. Ambedkar form the fourth group. Of all the groups, the followers of Dr. Ambedkar form the most dominant group. They are over 90% of the total Buddhist population in the country. Of them, 84% live in Maharashtra. The rest are scattered throughout India. The position of this group is likely to improve further as more and more followers of Dr. Ambedkar are seeking refuge in the Buddha Dhamma.

It may be relevant to consider as to what has been the impact of Buddhism on its new adherents, the people who responded to the clarion call given by Dr. Ambedkar and embraced Buddhism. Therefore the dominant research questions in this chapter will be:

- (1) Which Dalits converted to Buddhism and why?
- (2) What does their Buddhism look like?
- (3) What organizational steps have the Buddhists taken to institutionalize their religion among such a rapidly growing number of converts?

(4) What difference has Buddhism made in the lives of the converts?

### **The Problem of Pre Fix “Neo”**

Strangely, all those so-called untouchables who embraced Buddhism along with Dr. Ambedkar and also those so-called untouchables who got converted to Buddhism after his demise have been termed as neo-Buddhists by the scheming Indian press and by the interested caste Hindus. No so called untouchable who gets converted to Buddhism today likes the prefix neo. David Pandayan<sup>1</sup> writes that to a question “any other point you would like to mention”, in his questionnaire distributed among the Buddhists, two persons strongly opposed the use of the prefix.

(1) “I would like to bring to your kind notice that the topic of your study is wrong. You have termed it as ‘neo-Buddhism’ which is absolutely wrong. We have embraced Buddhism preached by the lord Buddha for the welfare of mankind under the able leadership of Dr. Ambedkar. Our conversion was really unique. Therefore, our critics started calling us ‘neo-Buddhist’ which is not acceptable to us. Hundreds of people have embraced Christianity or Islam, but they are not called neo-Christians or neo-Muslims. Why so?”

(2) “According to my strong opinion, this should not have been mentioned in this questionnaire, as a neo-Buddhist questionnaire. Because, by naming neo-Buddhist, you are keeping them (as) a separate group who are converted (to) Buddhism, ultimately treated again a particular class or caste, as were discarded by Hindus as untouchables.”

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<sup>1</sup> Pandayan K. David, *Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and the Dynamics Of Neo- Buddhism*, New Delhi, Gyan Publishing House, 1966 pp.41-3,203

While agreeing with the Buddhists Dr. Pandayan observes: the word neo-Buddhist more than giving a new identity to the so called untouchables, it retains indirectly the old identity. The caste continues to haunt as a ghost in the life of a neo-Buddhist. Hence, the term neo-Buddhist is not only detrimental to the interests of the new converts but to the Indian Buddhism revived by Dr. Ambedkar on the whole. The major flaw with this prefix is that it indicates that any neo-Buddhist is an ex- untouchable Hindu and as such is abominable as it mars the very purpose of conversion. The bitter memories linger on by this prefix. A Buddhist has to be taken as a Buddhist, without any string attached to his past. The ambiguity will cease only when the prefix neo is eliminated.

Because of all these reasons in the present study when we say Buddhists, here we mainly refer to the first batch of Dalits who converted themselves into Buddhism along with Ambedkar in 1956, at Nagpur and their progeny. The subsequent convert in Maharashtra and other parts of India, could also be broadly included in this category.

## **Effects of Conversion**

There is a general belief among common people that there is no remarkable change among the Buddhists so far as their life-style and status in society are concerned. Moreover, there seems to be no change in the attitude and behaviors of others towards the Buddhists vis-à-vis their Hindu counterparts. However, if at all there is any change among them, it is due to developmental factors, constitutional safeguards and other egalitarian measures adopted by lay rather than the change of

religion.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, these changes may be observed among the non-converted scheduled castes as well. But this is not true. It may be true in the regions where conversion started late or where its pace is slow. It may also be true of the mass of Buddhists living in slums of cities or landless labourers or marginal farmers living in the rural areas. But distinct changes in the life style, belief system and attitude of the converted Mahars in Maharashtra and Jatavas of Agra and educated white collar Buddhists in other parts of the country can not altogether be denied.<sup>3</sup>

The embracing of Buddhism created a sense of self-respect. They stopped rendering services such as removal of dead cattle, midwifery, beating drums, etc. which were considered to be demeaning and polluting. They, especially the young among them, refuse to celebrate Hindu festivals and do not participate in Hindu religious processions, yatras, and temple activities. The Buddhists celebrate their own festivals viz., Dhamma-chakra, Buddha Jayanti, Ambedkar Jayanti and observe Ambedkar's parinirvan divas, etc. they hold their marriage and death ceremonies according to Buddhist rituals. They have freed themselves from uncritical obedience to dogmas and blind belief in superstitions to a great extent. These are no mean achievements which conversion bestowed on them within a short span of time.<sup>4</sup>

The role of conversion can not be undermined simply on the ground that it did not bring material success nor enhance the status of the Buddhists. This is because these were not the main objectives behind the conversion. Dr. Ambedkar,

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<sup>2</sup> Patwardhan, Sunanda in her Article "Social Mobility and Conversion of Mahars" Sociological Bulletin 17 (2): 187-202, 1967 observes that Mahars as a community can be said to have attained upward social mobility (p.197) but she also infers that religion does not seem to be an important instrument of mobility. (p. 199).

<sup>3</sup> P. G. Jogdand: *Dalit Movement in Maharashtra*; New Delhi, Kanak Publication, 1991, pp. 149-57.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

leader of the conversion movement, clearly said, "My conversion is not for material gain, there is nothing which I can not attain by remaining an untouchable. My conversion is purely for reasons spiritual".<sup>5</sup> Emancipation of the so-called untouchables from mental slavery of shastras was far more important to Dr. Ambedkar than their material progress. This is because the latter can not be achieved, retained and fully availed without gaining the former. He said: poverty there is and there will always be... but poverty can not be an excuse for sacrificing human freedom.<sup>6</sup> Hence what was expected from conversion was primarily the acquisition of mental and psychological freedom, removal of inferiority complex and inculcation of self-dignity and self-respect, which are achieved to a great extent by the Buddhist converts.

A survey was conducted by the Gokhale institute of research, Poona, in 1962 at Bombay to ascertain the impact of the change of religion by the scheduled castes. The researchers reported the impact on the scheduled castes as "tremendous". The report further pointed out that the scheduled caste people have now become one and are very much united. They are trying to establish a casteless society on the principles of Buddhism. They are extremely proud of Buddhism. They are leading a dignified and honorable life in the society.

The impact of Buddha's teaching was studied by Arun Siddhu in 1978. his report revealed that:

(1) The ex-untouchables got rid of their inferiority complex; they have a fresh identity and a new acquired confidence. What is more, the young among them have completely shed superstitions...

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<sup>5</sup> Bhagwan Das. *Thus Spoke Ambedkar*; Vol. iv.; Bangalore: Ambedkar Sahitya Prakashan, 1980; p. 60.

<sup>6</sup> Dhananjaya Keer. *Dr. Ambedkar Life and Mission*; Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1990, p.490.

(2) There is a new cultural and social renaissance which has transformed the youth... only hard work, education and rational approach would bring progress, they believe;

(3) As far as the economic status is concerned there is only a marginal change among the newly educated Buddhists... by and large they have remained economically at the same level at which they were before conversion. But the radical transformation from blind hunger for education and knowledge among the Buddhist youth. This holds the key to their economic progress.<sup>7</sup>

The overwhelming majority of Dalit converts to Buddhism have been Mahars living in Maharashtra. Consequently, almost all studies focus upon them. Patwardhan described their conversion as free, voluntary, and massive in scale and oriented towards the goal of freedom and self-respect. Conversion included an explicit rejection of Hindu religion and its psychological conditioning along with the acceptance of Buddhism as both beneficial and moral.<sup>8</sup> Fiske described the conversion movement as spontaneous, "reached by a chain reaction".<sup>9</sup> Dr. Ambedkar led the Mahars into Buddhism and scholars have paid far more attention to his reasons for conversion than to those of his followers.

However, two studies do try to find out their motivations independently of his. During 1966-7 Adele Fiske asked 200 converts why they had become Buddhists. One-third of the 112 who actually responded to her questionnaire said they did so as a rejection of Hinduism; the rest gave such positive reasons as liking

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<sup>7</sup> Sastri, Sankaranand (ed.) 1990, *Ambedkar on Buddhist Conversion and Its Impact*; Eastern Book Linkers. Delhi, 1990, p.19.

<sup>8</sup> Patwardhan, Sunanda, *Change Among India's Harijans: Maharashtra-A Case Study*, New Delhi. Orient Longman, 1993, pp.128, 139-40.

<sup>9</sup> Adele M. Fiske. "The Understanding Of "Religion" And "Buddhism" Among India's New Buddhists". In *Ambedkar And The Neo-Buddhist Movement*, T. S. Wilkinson and M. M. Thomas (eds.). Madras, Christian Literature Society, 1972, pp.110-11.

Buddhism, following Dr. Ambedkar, and wishing “to live as a man”.<sup>10</sup> Fiske concluded that “the spontaneity of conversion, obedience to Babasaheb, the pride in a “rational” religion, are all aspects or manifestations of the basic motivation, the desire for human dignity that has led to the choice of Buddhism on the part of millions”.<sup>11</sup> Non-Mahar Dalits did not feel the same obligation to follow Dr. Ambedkar’s lead. In fact, both Patwardhan and Jogdand have indicated that a main reason why other Dalit castes in Maharashtra did not convert to Buddhism was because the Mahars had; for them the Mahars were a negative reference group.<sup>12</sup>

This gives added significance to Owen Lynch’s findings concerning the conversion of a non-Mahar group outside Maharashtra, the Jatavas in Agra. Lynch was convinced that the Jatavas became Buddhists because of Dr. Ambedkar. He had visited Agra in 1946 and 1956, so they knew him personally. He was a Dalit leader, a national leader, and a revolutionary; as such, he could both understand and help them. “He was one in the long line of saints who abjured the caste system, and he was for them an untouchable like those in their folk ballads. He provided a focus of identification and a sense of vicarious satisfaction for many Jatav longings.”<sup>13</sup>

What is now needed are studies of the more recent conversions in the 1990s, particularly among groups of Dalits who have not had the personal contact with Dr. Ambedkar which the Jatavas and the Mahars had had.

Turning from the question of motivation to the Buddhism of the converts themselves, Lynch reported that among the Jatavas Buddhism was a reference point

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 107

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 115

<sup>12</sup> Sunanda Patwardhan, op.cit., pp. 17, 131, 154, 157-8; And Prahlad Gangaram Jogdand, *Dalit Movement In Maharashtra*, New Delhi; Kanak Publications, 1991, p. 156.

<sup>13</sup> Owen Lynch, “Dr. B. R. Ambedkar-Myth and Charisma”, In, *The Untouchables in Contemporary India*, J. Michael Mahar (ed.), Tucson: University Of Arizona Press, 1972, p.110.



for self-identification, that the Buddhist *viharas* functioned as an important local symbol of their belonging to a great national and international religion, but that in everyday life Buddhism served primarily as a social philosophy while Jatav rituals and many of their symbols remained unchanged. Buddhists continued to celebrate Hindu holidays along with Buddhist festivals, to use their traditional life-cycle ceremonies, and to believe in evil spirits. They were thus both Hindus and Buddhists in religious life.

Reports of field research among Mahars in Maharashtra present a somewhat different picture. Patwardhan found in early 1960s that Buddhists in Pune were going through a process of transition. While identifying themselves as Buddhists, many were still acting as Hindus. However, among the more committed Buddhists, old beliefs had largely disappeared, vows and pilgrimages to Hindu shrines were rare, and few if any important Hindu festivals were being celebrated. In other words, they had made a significant *break with the past*. Moreover, Buddhist rituals and ceremonies were being adopted,<sup>14</sup> at times with the Hindu ones. Patwardhan's study highlights the following aspects:

### **Search for a New Identity**

The ideology and the act of conversion demand the crystallization of a new identity for these Buddhists. An important dimension of a search for identity is directed towards the institutionalization of the new religious view and the way of life.

Culture symbols in the given context need two bases of commonness. One is the immediate cultural identity with the religious ethos of Buddhism. This

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<sup>14</sup> Ramesh H. Kamble, "Social Meanings Of Conversion To Buddhism Among Nav-Boudhas", Indian Missiological Review: March 1995, p. 28

involves not only the positive acceptance of Buddhistic ethico-moral and ritualistic symbols and values, but also the negation of the counterparts of the value normative elements of Hinduism. The other base is the wider Indian cultural matrix. Here the problems lies in effecting a cohesive integration of several dimensions of the new challenge – viz; the historical background of the precept, practice and persistence of Untouchability, the deep-rooted religious conditioning of Hinduism and of its elimination, institutionalization of the new ideology of Buddhism within the group and the attempts to make it part of the wider Buddhist group in India at the organization and structural levels. The integration of all these levels is the main task and a prerequisite for the crystallization of the collective identity for these Buddhists.

### **The identity Crisis**

One of the primary concerns in the situation is that of identity and of self-image. The individual Buddhist has to redefine himself as well as the group to which he belongs. An identity crisis of this kind has two dimensions – of the individual as well as of the group.

The identity crisis is seen in the manifestation of ambivalence, confusion and uncertainty. The converts are faced with many issues and questions. Are they to stop making sweet dishes on Holi? Can their children during Diwali play with firecrackers or not? Who is the ultimate authority for the Buddhists whose word is final in all such matters? From such mundane questions to the non-mundane, there are many issues that remain undefined, unclear.

A transitional phase exhibits contradictions, uncertainties and a blurring of frontiers. The known has become blurred and the known-to-be is unclear. The

transitional period is then characterized by a co-existence of the old and the new. Gods of both the religions are worshipped; Hindu and Buddhist traditions, rituals and ceremonies coexist. This blurring of the frontier is itself the crisis. The crisis is deeper because of the mass scale of conversions. When an individual becomes a convert to Islam or Christianity or Buddhism, it is easier for him to merge with the new group, which is institutionalized. His behaviour and action are easily adjusted to the new pattern. The death of Ambedkar slowed down the process of institutionalization. However, a major section of the successor leadership strongly felt that attention should be focussed on stabilizing the process of conversion; to organise *mandals*, to train a new cadre of priesthood and institutionalize religious behaviour within an elaborate system of rites, and the manner and method of performing the various rites connected with the life cycle crises.

### **The Transitional Phase**

In spite of the co-existence of the two religions, the lack of clarity and contradiction between declaration and behaviour, the over all picture is one of radical, fundamental and revolutionary change.

None of the Hindu calendrical festivals or the sacred days of Hindu gods or pilgrimages to Hindu holy places are observed or undertaken by the radical, devout Buddhists. The inner rejection was total in many cases. A Buddhist said, "We have sold our gods". Another "threw them into the river". Some "have lost the fear of god".

Another convert, was aware of his inner contradiction. He said, he still calls himself a Mahar though he is a Buddhist by conviction. This he does because "my mind is not cleaned of all the old. Old Hindu beliefs, faiths and superstition come

up again and again. Only when my mind is cleansed of this and pure, can I accept the new faith in its totality”.

Thus the scholar observes contradictions in the behaviour of the Buddhists and the co-existence of the elements of the two religions, Hindu and the Buddhist, in religious beliefs and social action. Negation of the old rituals has taken place and the institutionalization of new one is yet to be completed. The new priesthood is not organized yet and between the old and new lies the transitional phase of uncertainty with regard to the performance of life-cycle rituals. Yet the scholar adds significantly, none of the important festivals of the Hindu calendar or the sacred days of the gods like Ram Navami or Gokulashtami, nor fasting on the Shivaratri day or Ekadashi nor are pilgrimages to Hindu shrines observed by the majority of the Buddhists. Pilgrimages to Hindu holy places have become rare. Since conversion, all these places have lost their significance.

## **Magic and Superstition**

Out of the total interviews, only 1 per cent believed in possession and none believed in sorcery, witchcraft or ghosts; 15 per cent believed in the common superstitions of the evil eye associated with time, place and person. Such religio-ritualistic concepts were a part of their belief system prior to conversion. Today they brush it aside with total contempt. The following statements are revealing and speak for themselves:

“Ghost. possession, everything is false.” “Since diksha, there is no possession. Formerly we believed in all this because we were ignorant.” “In those days, when chicken-pox epidemic came, women used to beat the drum and sing. They used to go into a trance. It is all false. The moment Babasaheb took diksha,

Devi no longer comes.” “There is no black magic. It does not exist. The mind is becoming pure.”

It can be said that the Changes are fundamental. Magical practices and belief in superstition have to a large extent been eliminated. This may be said to be due to:

- 1) Unquestioned devotion to Ambedkar’s leadership,
- 2) awakening of the entire community –social, political and psychological,
- 3) acceptance of education as an instrument of mobility, and
- 4) Group identity.

## **The New Order**

Hinduism has given place to Buddhism. In the process, the new order is being institutionalized. This refers to the manner of performance of rituals, the ceremonies to be done, the gods to be worshipped and the life-cycle rituals to be observed. Detailed instructions are given; pamphlets and books have come into existence to guide the converts.

For instance, during Diwali, the Buddhists “are to worship the Buddha with the new grains and sugar cakes. Rangoli has to adorn the house after being cleaned, and gifts are to be given to the poor. This is done during the day, and at night the Buddha temple and all the houses should be lit with earthen lamps.

Inspired partly by religious motivations and being theistic, the Buddhist creed believes in the existence of gods. Buddha has replaced Ram, Krishna, etc. The Buddha is accepted as the supreme god. This introduction of monism is a new phenomenon for the depressed classes.

Sudden change from one belief-system to another belief-system can create an inner, psychological vacuum. This has not happened, partly because a substitution has taken place. One symbol system has been replaced by another; Hindu gods by the Buddha; Hindu sanskaras have given way to the Buddhist rituals; Buddhistic *vandanas* are recited instead of the Vedic Sanskritic mantras. To use Zelliott's term "Paliaization" has taken the place of sanskritization. Conversion to Buddhism in 1956 brought about a *total breaking away* from the Hindu society.

Zelliott later noted also the building of Buddhist *viharas* which were quite different in appearance and function from Hindu temples and shrines.<sup>15</sup> Two features of Buddhism, both inside and outside Maharashtra, were particularly distinctive among the converts. One was the prominent place given to Dr. Ambedkar, which Zelliott summed up as succinctly as filling "three traditional ties of loyalty: the planner for progress: social, political, and religious; the guru, i.e. the one who showed the way; and, in Buddhist terminology, a bodhisattva."<sup>16</sup> The other was wide acceptance of Dr. Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism as a valid and a legitimate Indian form of Buddhism.<sup>17</sup>

There is also broad scholarly consensus that the most significant consequences of conversion to Buddhism were at the psychological level. Human dignity is what they sought through conversion to Buddhism and that is what they

<sup>15</sup> For example, they were community gathering places for social and educational as well as religious purposes. Eleanor Zelliott, *From Untouchable To Dalit*, pp.226-7.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p.245. see also Adele M. Fiske, op. cit., pp: 112-13; Richard W. Taylor, "The Ambedkarite Buddhists", in T. S. Wilkinson and M. M. Thomas (eds.), op. cit., pp. 142-5; Owen W. Lynch, *The Politics Of Untouchability*, p. 163; A. K. Narain, "Dr. Ambedkar, Buddhism and Social Change- A Reappraisal", in *Dr. Ambedkar, Buddhism And Social Change*, A. K. Narain and D. C. Ahir (eds.), p. 77.

<sup>17</sup> Owen Lynch quotes one Buddhist in Agra saying, "no doubt, Ambedkar emphasised certain things more than others. but what he has done is to put Buddhism in a form whereby it will be understood by the people of the country, India. This needed to be done." Op. cit., p. 158. See also Adele M. Fiske, op. cit., and pp.119-23.

got from it. This was the overall finding of Fiske's survey.<sup>18</sup> Other changes were not unrelated to this newly acquired sense of dignity. Taylor reported that while the converts' status was unchanged in the eyes of society, many had given up some of their most degrading traditional work and had simplified their religious ceremonies.<sup>19</sup> Wilkinson studied two villages, one on the outskirts of Nagpur and the other ten miles further away. In the former, he found considerable occupational mobility among the Buddhist, many of whom were employed outside the village whereas in the latter there was none because the Buddhist were still bound up with the traditional village economy. However, change was not simply a matter of the freedom of occupational made possible by a suburban location. Change of religion has liberated them from the stigma of Untouchability, thus enhancing their self confidence to a great measure. Many of them explained that the economic benefit after conversion was mainly due to their giving up their rituals and ceremonies for which a considerable amount was being spent. Not being burden with all this conventional expenses, they could now use the money thus saves for bettering their economic condition.<sup>20</sup>

Conversion to Buddhism also created a new eagerness to get ones children educated.<sup>21</sup> Patwardhan pointed to increase conflict with the higher caste when converts gave up traditional duties and refused to accept the indignities of the past.<sup>22</sup> It has also led to economic hardship as well as a deeper immersion in politics.

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<sup>18</sup> Adele M. Fiske, "*The Understanding of Religion and Buddhism among India's New Buddhist*," in op. cit., p119.

<sup>19</sup> Richard W. Taylor, Op.cit. Pp132-135.

<sup>20</sup> T.S. Wilkinson, "*Buddhism and Social change among Mahars*," in op. cit. no.92, p80.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. pp99-100.

<sup>22</sup> Sumanda Patwardhan, op. cit. no.88, p158.

These are findings of studies conducted in the early to mid 1960s. Zelliot's latter observation based primarily on contacts with educated Buddhist, were that conversion to Buddhism had brought "psychological freedom from the sense of being a polluting person"; a dignified myth of origins for those who need it: "a new set of religious ideas, a thought provoking image, a series of occasions around which to rally which have no historic overtones of cast hierarchy"; the will to prove every possible means of economic advancement.<sup>23</sup> It has also liberated the voice of Dalits to express their creativity in song, poetry, literature and art.<sup>24</sup> In the 1980s Prahlad Jogdand asked a set of hundred respondents almost the same questions about the consequences that Adele Fiske had asked decades earlier and the answer were not very different, virtually all the consequences mentioned were psychological: self respect, confidence, the end of an inferiority complex.<sup>25</sup>

### **Attitudinal Changes and the New Ideology**

The renunciation of Hinduism involved not only caste Hindu attitude towards untouchables, but also the untouchables' perception of themselves as defined by Hinduism. By ridding themselves of their Hindu identity, untouchables would be shedding their ancient and self-destructive self perception as well. It represents the movement of human determination to be free from exploitation and bondage of man by man; it is a movement towards purity of mind, rational consciousness and correction of human perception, as against misconceptions, illusions and ignorance; it is movement towards love, compassion and peace against violence caused by man against man; it represents a positive human

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<sup>23</sup> Zelliot. Op.cit. Pp219-220.

<sup>24</sup> Gary Michael Tartakov, "*Art And Identity: The Rise Of A New Buddhist Imagery*," and Eleanor Zelliot. "New Voices Of The Buddhist Of India," In A. K. Narain and D. C. Ahir,(eds.) op. cit. no.... pp175-194 and pp195-207.

<sup>25</sup> Prahlad Gangaram Jogdand, op. cit., pp.149-157.



attitude towards good and happy life as against evil and unhappiness caused to man by man himself.

The feeling of liberation, regeneration and even rebirth was indeed experienced by most Dalits who took part in the conversion. This sentiment was enhanced by a new sense of dignity and self-worth. The conversion to Buddhism had restored the new Buddhist humanity, and the feeling of shame, inferiority and degradation was washed away. Kharat, a prominent Buddhist intellectual and writer thus express this emotional or mental revolution, which swept the ex-Untouchable:

I have accepted the Buddhist Dhamma. I am Buddhist now. I am not a Mahar, nor an Untouchable, nor even a Hindu. I have become a human being. I am equal with all. I am not a low-born or inferior now. With the acceptance of Buddhism my Untouchability has been erased. The chains of Untouchability which shackled my feet have now been shattered. Now I am a human being like all others. I am no longer the slave and menial servant of high-caste Hindu. I will never again accept servile labour from the high-caste Hindu. I have become independent. I am now free. I have become a free citizen of independent India.

The mental and emotional revolution, which the conversion entailed, may be said to be its most remarkable effect. The study on Buddhists conducted by Sunanda Patwardhan revealed that 90% of her sample considered themselves to be Buddhist, while only 10% identified themselves as Hindus.<sup>26</sup> The most important and outstanding component in the Buddhists' self-identification was the negation

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<sup>26</sup> Patwardhan, Op. cit.p. 144.

and rejection of all things Hindu. Several informants told, for example, of the intense feeling of liberation they experienced when they gathered up all the Hindu images from the Devhar (special shrine for household deities) and threw them into the gutter, sometimes to the consternation and dismay of the older member of the family. In the same vein, a recent study by Vasant Deshpande reveals that even among those who did not formally convert to Buddhism, the sentiment of liberation from the confines of the old religion was very powerful.<sup>27</sup> With respect to religious practices, the conversion was followed by the replacement of all pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses with the portraits of the Buddha and Ambedkar, who became a new Bodhisattva to be worshipped. The observance of most Hindu ceremonies came to an end, although some festivals such as Diwali continued to be observed. Pilgrimages to Hindu temples and places of worship also ceased.

Adele M. Fiske has also made an attempt to analyse the impact of Buddhist conversion on the life of the converts. According to him the conversion to Buddhism may be described as a rejection of and attempt to escape from the caste system. Caste to the outcaste has meant centuries of economic, social, political and religious oppression, a denial of their humanity, legitimized by religion in the concept of purity and pollution. Fiske's research presents chiefly the opinions of the Buddhists themselves and of some of their critics on their own situation as Buddhists vis-à-vis the caste system of India. The interviewed sample belonged chiefly to Maharashtra; however it was also drawn from other places in India during the years 1966-67.

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<sup>27</sup> Vasant Deshpande, *Towards Social Integration: Problems Of Adjustment Of Sheduled Caste Elite*. pune. 1978. chapter 7.

Fiske suggests the Buddhist conversions, have been chiefly in Maharashtra and Agra, and they were almost exclusively among the Mahars and the Jatavas. However, in almost all parts of India- the Punjab, U.P., Bengal, Madras, Mysore- there are some to be found.

### **Economic Betterment**

The economic situation of the untouchables has been desperate for centuries – 90% have lived in villages as landless workers. Their specialised skills were “unclean” occupations and poorly paid. They have been and are the poorest segment of the landless class; poverty and squalor is their lot – whether in their little village slum or in the great horror slums of metropolitans. This is due to their situation as outcaste, as unclean and polluting.<sup>28</sup> There is little evidence that conversion to Buddhism directly improves the untouchable’s economic condition. But Fiske suggests, it is impossible to make generalizations, as, he adds, in some areas the Buddhists are now well off.

There is, however, one way in which Buddhists point out that their religion has helped economically. It has eliminated the payments to Brahmin priests for ritual, divination (horoscopes) and above all by cutting down on marriage expenses. Weddings formerly put the family in debt for life.

### **Social and Moral Betterment**

The Buddhists link social betterment with Buddhism and morality it teaches. One of the respondent replied to Fiske, “Our concern is more social than religious. We are now free from Hindu ideas and are much happier. So we will never change from Buddhism. We were never real Hindus before. Religion is a

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<sup>28</sup> Andre Beteille, “Pollution and Poverty”, in, J. M. Mahar (ed.) *The Untouchables In Contemporary India*; University Of Arizona Press; 1972; pp. 416-420.

needed thing. Only when morality is there, then only your life will be happy; otherwise you live like an animal." It is doubtful, in fact, that Buddhism itself better the social position. Even though the Buddhists feel themselves to be different from before, there is no change in others.

But the responses of the U. P. Buddhist group portray a different picture. They asserted, "Life as Buddhists is better than Hindus. There is no Untouchability, we are free from it, and are treated better now because we are Buddhists. Things are better due to Buddhism more than to laws. The whole level of society is going up, but we go faster due to Buddhism."

### **Psychological Betterment**

For Fiske a real psychological change in the attitude toward caste and its consequences has taken place. He substantiated his position with the help of the responses of interviews amongst the Buddhists. "Does Buddhism really better our position? Yes. We belong to the lowest group in Hinduism. When we leave it, we are no longer the lowest". This was a reply of a Buddhist in Jammu. "In Maharashtra people are proud to say that they are Buddhist. They claim to be Buddhist even if they have not been formally converted. The simple declaration is enough. For example, in a 500 house village, five or ten houses are Mahars, whether converted or not, this called themselves as Buddhist. Another respondent replied, "we have also started to study what is Buddhism. We left everything of the Hindu religion, caste especially. Because of Buddhism, we gave up all that and are now stepping forward in thought, education, behavior and everything". Other responses included statements like- "I am not a Harijan, I am a Buddhist." "Buddhism has much influence our lives. Our inferiority complex is gone, the

sense of being an outcaste. Dr. Ambedkar has given us this, to be proud of being a Buddhist.”

Fiske concludes that caste for the Buddhist is the great enemy and caste for them means Hinduism. Their effort to break away has been a heroic one. Its success so far is, as we have seen, very limited, but even so is of great significance to them. They realise that, as the Buddha said, they must be a light unto themselves. No one else will help them-and their new self-image, as Ambedkar had hoped, is undoubtedly the first step toward self improvement especially as it integrally linked to their push toward formal education and is the source of new leaders.

## **Identity Formation**

With the conversion to Buddhism, the Dalit movement under Ambedkar took the ultimate step in establishing its new and separate identity from Hindu society and its ideology. By becoming Buddhists, the untouchables demonstrated that they had progressed beyond Hindu scriptures; they would no longer see themselves through Hindu eyes, as untouchables, nor would they perform those menial and polluting tasks which had been assigned to them. Through the act of conversion, they had freed themselves from Hindu order. Thus, the Buddhist conversion movement represents a watershed in the history of the Dalit movement and has had a pervasive impact on the Dalit community as a whole.

The most immediate and visible impact of the conversion to Buddhism lies in the realm of ideology. For by renouncing Hinduism and the Hindu social order, the Buddhists had severed their connection with their history as untouchables, and had regained their identity as free men. The habits learned as untouchables, the

servility and the lack of enterprise has been eradicated and in their place a new mode of social thought and behaviour is being constructed. Attempts to transform the social consciousness of the untouchables had been carried on by the Dalit movement since its very inception; the Buddhist conversion, however, offered a new and distinct framework within which this process could take place. And in the wake of the conversion, activities and institutions organised by the Dalit movement to propagate the new religion and its social ideology grew in scope as well as in number. Buddhism and its adoption became the occasion for a cultural regeneration and revival.

The Dalits by becoming Buddhists were not merely out of any caste, but within the framework of a religion which assures equality for all and which is practised by billions all over the world. Theoretically speaking, even if the so called untouchables were to do menial jobs, as Buddhists they are to be reckoned as beings of worth, dignity and honour. It was not merely amelioration nor alleviation nor mitigation but reaching lofty heights of social equality. That they have come out of this caste structure of Hinduism is to say that they have literally broken the fetters that had crippled them for ages. Having broken their fetters, they are free people, but with a new identity. With this new identity, they have "taken off" as a society. Having secured this identity they have a social standing, not theirs' hitherto.

Patwardhan finds that the Buddhist movement offers a new definite identity to the former Mahars as a group and this act as a weapon to fight against the majority to secure certain advantages. Their new group identity is strong and exclusive; and there is a total rejection of the past image. There is a small minority which is not yet converted to Buddhism, which works almost like an endogamous

caste. The Buddhists do not marry non-Buddhists. The pull towards Buddhism is tremendous and one could expect that the non-Buddhist Mahars would soon convert themselves to Buddhism.

Yet, the question of the new basis for self identification and the definition of a new communal identity through Buddhism is complex. In some instances, the declaration of oneself as Buddhist depends upon the context and the situation. Buddhism is most prominently an identification which is displayed within the community and which provides a new basis for internal cohesion. As such, it is related to the development of communal pride and communal mobilization. Thus the declaration of Buddhism may have more to do with the crystallization of the community and the engendering of feelings of solidarity on a new and respectable basis. Vis-à-vis the larger society, however, and particularly when it comes to access to governmental benefits, the scheduled caste identity may return. As Zelliott mentions, "The Buddhist is also caught in a situation in which he rejects the idea of his Untouchability and yet does not reject the benefits conferred upon untouchables by government, which he feels Dr. Ambedkar won for him and which are recompense for the ill-treatment of the past. Some Buddhists would prefer to cut all links, helpful and un-helpful, with their former status; most do not see why they should lose benefits which attempt to correct former injustice, economic and educational, because they themselves reject social injustice by conversion. Many have hopes that the problem will be resolved for their children, who will be true Buddhists without caste".<sup>29</sup> The power of the government to grant or withdraw benefits according to its own criteria seems to be beyond their control. In 1990, the Government of India had extended the same facilities and right of reservation to

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<sup>29</sup> Zelliott Op.cit. P.14

the neo-Buddhist as are given to the scheduled Caste under the constitution. These rights of reservation to these people would be available provided they belong to the Scheduled Caste before converting to Buddhism. As a result, with the fear of loosing reservation, many people who felt shy of declaring their religion. Buddhism, in the census freely declared themselves to Buddhist. As against a population of 4,650,194 Buddhist in 1981, census of 1991 showed 6,323,492 a growth rate of 35.98 per cent.

Many other states have registered a spectacular entry as can be seen from the table below:

States	Year 1981	Year 1991	Percentage increase
Punjab	799	24,930	3020.15
Tamil Nadu	735	2,128	189.52
Utter Pradesh	54,542	221,433	305.99
Madhya Pradesh	75,312	216,667	183.69
Haryana	761	2,058	170.43
Gujarat	7,550	11,615	53.84
Andhra Pradesh	12,930	22,153	71.33
Karnataka	42,251	73,012	72.81
Delhi	7,117	13,906	95.39

**Source: Dr. M. Vijayanunni, Census of India 1991 series-1, paper-1, Religion. (Government of India, Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, 1995)**



Soon after 1957 General Election both the Central and State Governments stopped giving scholarship and Stipend facilities to the newly converted Buddhist. Understandably, it has an adverse effect on the Buddhist conversion movement. However, the Maharashtra Government restored scholarship and stipend in 1958. But the centre was apathetic to the issue till 1990. And after the Government's decision we see a sudden increase in Buddhist population in the census of 1991. The above table indicates that many of the name of those who have embrace Buddhism at public ceremonies, appeared in the Buddhist own statistics but since they did not officially declared themselves as Buddhist, their names did not figure in the census reports prior to 1991.

In addition to the sense of release from being untouchable, there is a sense of belonging to a great past, an identity that supersedes current low status. There are many ways for the Buddhist convert to express this identity. There are an astonishing number of visual and verbal references to the Buddhist past within the current movement. Pali is taught in all the colleges founded by Dr. Ambedkar and his followers. Whenever possible, architectural features from Buddhist structures, usually the caves at Ajanta or the Stupa at Sanchi, are worked into school buildings or viharas. They have separate festivals and pilgrimage destinations from other religious communities. The festivals celebrated by the Buddhist community are- Ambedkar's birth and death days, Buddha Jayanti, and the anniversary of the conversion on 14<sup>th</sup> October 1956. They are observed in such a way as to involve the whole community and to make a statement to the outside world.

In spite of a thousand possible examples of new thought and new life, it must be said that the mass of Buddhists in the slum of cities, or the land-less in rural areas, live in much the same way as the desperately poor in any culture. It is

difficult here for new Buddhist identity to produce a new Buddhist life-style. What has happened is that even in areas where observers report “no change at all”, one finds that Buddhists no longer carry out what they feel are ritually submissive, degrading, or impure duties; that some young people, far more than other untouchable and backward communities, become educated; and that Buddhists do not participate in the Hindu public practices so long denied to them, not now out of prohibition but out of a sense of separateness.

Buddhist conversion has given the devout and religious minded Buddhists a field of religious investigation which is both highly respected for its wisdom and insight and totally free from caste bias. It has given strong Buddhist communities a new set of religious ideas, a thought provoking image, a series of occasions around which to rally which have no historic overtones of caste hierarchy. It has freed the ex-untouchables from any sense of inferiority, suspicion that any ill-treatment is justified, and although this belief in equality was a part of the Dalit movement from its initial stages, it seems to have taken a conversion to a new identity to under gird this tenet.

With the conversion to Buddhism, the Dalit movement under Ambedkar took the ultimate step in establishing its new and separate identity from Hindu society and its ideology. By becoming Buddhists, the untouchables demonstrated that they had progressed beyond Hindu scriptures; they would no longer see themselves through Hindu eyes, as untouchables, nor would they perform those menial and polluting tasks which had been assigned to them. Through the act of conversion, they had freed themselves from Hindu order. Thus the Buddhist conversion movement represents a watershed in the history of the Dalit movement and has had a pervasive impact on the Dalit community as a whole.

## Conclusion

Some important aspects of the present work are: earlier conversions; the Buddhist movement since 1956 and its significance; the search for new identity; and the post conversion problems and perspectives.

Conversion to another religion acting as a catalytic agent of change has been attempted by individuals in all castes and communities throughout the historical period. The contemporary Buddhist movement has also attempted to use conversion as an instrument of change for an enhanced status. But the contemporary Buddhist conversion of the Dalits is different in a dimension from the others. To understand this we have dwelt not on the similarities but more on the dissimilarities. between the contemporary conversion of Dalits to Buddhism from the earlier conversions to either Christianity or Islam.

There were two basic dissimilarities between the earlier conversions and the present one. Conversions to Christianity were due primarily to poverty and conversions to Islam had the backing of the Muslim rulers. Such conversions did not bring about equality. There was not only the difference between the white Christians and the black Christians<sup>1</sup>, but there was no social contact between the Harijan and the Brahmin Christians. The mazhabi Sikhs are looked down upon by Sikhs who are not mazhabis. The south Indian Christians distinguished between the castes of their converts in their seating accommodation in the churches, and the dislike of the exterior castes does not immediately disappear when they turn Muslim.<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding Islam, Christianity and Sikhism – the strange

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<sup>1</sup> Jagjivan Ram – *"The Report Of The Seminar On Casteism And Removal Of Untouchability"* Pub. Indian Conference Of Social Work, 1958 – p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> 1931 Census of India vol. I, part I, p. 486.

phenomenon of untouchable Sikhs and untouchable Christians continues, it shows the grip caste has on the public mind, it also shows the effect of the Hindu social order on Islam and Christianity.

In contrast the present conversion<sup>3</sup> was primarily a free and voluntary one. As we have seen, it did not have the protection of the ruling class, nor did it have a motive of any financial advantage. It was goal – oriented, having norms and it assumed the form of voluntaristic action. It had a modern form in the sense of being rational, directed and with a fixed goal. This is not to say that all the earlier conversions were brought about under coercion and the voluntary aspect was totally absent.

While the earlier conversions were individual, sporadic and isolated, the 1956 conversion came about after a long period of deliberation; it was organised and was on a mass scale.<sup>4</sup> What makes the 1956 event significant is its group character. Such a scale of mass, voluntary conversion was unknown in history. We do not find another example in modern history, of a group as a whole, accepting a religion which it considers as good and moral, and yet practical and advantageous to itself.

Untouchables' search and equality in modern times started since about 1920, when Dr. Ambedkar assumed the position of leadership of the group. Dr. Ambedkar created an awakening among them about their downtrodden conditions and relative deprivation in life and aroused in them the spirit of self-respect and self-confidence to fight against the evils of Hindu-caste society. After India's independence the country began to build in the minds of the so-called

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<sup>3</sup> Eleanor Zelliot 1966.

<sup>4</sup> Kharat S. 1966 pp.102-107.

untouchables new hopes and aspirations and offered new promises through propaganda, legislation and constitutional measures. Dr. Ambedkar and his followers, however, soon realised that it was difficult to bring about change in hindu society's treatment of the so-called untouchables through such measures too. The Buddhist conversion was a response to this situation.

We have seen how and why Ambedkar embraced Buddhism. Two prime motives which prompted him towards conversion were the rejection of the Hindu social system and a belief in a religious way of life. He believed that religion alone can establish equality among human beings and that religion is important for man and humanity. Ambedkar, it is evident, was on a lifelong search for a formula which could meet a number of desires. One of those was to retain the identity and the solidarity of the group. His next was to lose the stigma of Untouchability. The third was to register the deep resentment of the group against all the other castes for their perpetration of centuries long injustices. Having decided to relinquish Hinduism, he looked for suitable alternate religions. Subsequently he was attracted by the spiritual, social, political and scientific (rational) dimensions of Buddhism. The main reasons for his accepting Buddhism are undoubtedly the factors of human dignity and social justice. Buddhism was more democratic, ethical and egalitarian according to him and hence the inevitable choice. He tried social reforms and it appeared to him a struggle endless. His decision to embrace Buddhism was to realise human dignity, equality, liberty and justice. The movement spearheaded by him can be viewed as the culmination of the revolution from within. Ambedkar's role is an extraordinarily one for he detested the feeling of patronage of the caste Hindu reformers.

Until recently the government prohibited Buddhists from claiming the privileges of Hindu scheduled castes. This is in spite of the fact that untouchables have never been accepted as Hindus, and excluded from temple entry and any but fringe participation in village religious activities. Therefore, many in order to share this "protected discrimination"; at least until their education is complete do not admit to Buddhist legally, though they claim to be Buddhist at heart. So far Buddhists are legally not "scheduled caste" yet in practice are discriminated against as much as if they were. Andre Beteille has maintained that the conversion of Ambedkar's followers to Buddhism seems to have had little impact on upper caste Hindu society.<sup>5</sup>

And there is little evidence that conversion to Buddhism has directly improved the untouchable's economic condition. However there are certain positive values received by them from their new religion. The Buddhists link their social betterment with Buddhism and morality it teaches. They claim now they are better educated and morally superior to any body. It is true to say that Buddhism made them to build Buddhist brotherhood, and psychological freedom.

By conversion, Buddhists may be claiming equality with others; but the Hindu counterparts refuse to recognise his newly attained equal status. Buddhists are still a persecuted minority. However it can be said that the converts now leading a Buddhist standard of life, which enables them to change their behavioural patterns, so it certainly reduces the harshness of casteism.

Their effort to break away has been a historic one. The conversion has given them moral strength and showed the way to differ with their past Hindu life.

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<sup>5</sup> Andre Beteille, "Pollution And Poverty", In, J. M. Mahar.

However, its success so far is very limited, but even so is of great significance to them.

As per Ambedkar's strategy of change, his call for mass conversion to Buddhism was an attempt to create a new self- image for the untouchable as an initial step toward self- improvement through education. As described in our account of Buddhist activity, we have seen that such attempts continue to break the bonds of tradition from which the traditional social order draws much of its strength and tenacity. While the magnitude of recorded conversions to Buddhism is most impressive, the separateness fostered by the new identity and the regional basis of the Buddhist conversion movement suggests that it is an interim measure rather than an ultimate solution. A measure feature of Buddhist activity – the creation of schools and hostels – affirms the importance of education as the way out of the rural communities in which their traditional plight is most firmly rooted.

Our account of Buddhist conversion movement reveals that the Buddhists are acquiring leadership. Notably men and women in such professions as law, and those holding executive positions in labour organizations as well as in the administration have served as sustainers and catalysts in wide variety of organizations. In many instances these people serve to link and co-ordinate city-based programs reaching out into the surrounding villages.

In the last analysis, as Kingsley Davis says, "social change is individual change". Unless the individual Harijan changed in his attitudes no amount of legislative measures or conversion as such can create a real revolution, the true inner emancipation from Untouchability and all that it implies. Ambedkar was well aware of the deep need for an inner change in the individual Dalit, for "revolutions are made in the minds of men". He therefore meticulously devised 22 vows. As a

result, conversion was a total rejection of the Hindu caste society. Further, it can be said that the new image is created by a dual process, the positive and the negative. The positive refers to the acceptance of Buddhistic Dhamma, its ethical tenets and prescriptions, the eight-fold-path, etc. this by itself is not sufficient; for the former Hindu system of beliefs and practice need to be negated. So, first eight vows are negative in character. From them two actions can be noted. An attempt is made to wipe away the impact and psychological conditioning of Hinduism at two levels- the philosophical and the structural. By denying the worship of Rama and Krishna, and by refusing to believe in reincarnation, etc., the fundamental beliefs of Hinduism were to be discarded by the converts. Its institutional expressions in the performance of rites and ceremonies, the role of the Brahmin priest were to be dispensed with. These negations were not left to the wishes of the people but in the form of vows, they are institutionalised. This is essential because without the act of negation, the positive act of acceptance of Buddhism would remain partial. Hence through the vows both the positive and the negative aspects of initiation into a new religion are given institutional expression.

In short, it may be said that those so-called Untouchables who have embraced Buddhism at the behest of Dr. Ambedkar have, undoubtedly, achieved a moderate success in their movement towards equality, freedom, human dignity, self respect and justice. In the social field, they are getting due respect, equal treatment and a better deal from their former oppressors at least outwardly. In the villages, they have yet to get equal treatment. There is more unity and strength at the social level as they met regularly in the viharas. In the educational field there is substantial progress, as a result of which they are getting employment opportunities. In the economic field a little progress has been made as compare to



that in the pre-independence period. But when it is compared to that of other Caste Hindus, they have miles to go. Education is the only means through which these people can stand on their own feet as it helps in providing gainful employment. Finally, the change in religion has had a greater impact psychologically. In this connection Prof. Zelliott says “my own observations among the Buddhist, which have tended to be primarily of educated Buddhist, support the view that psychological freedom from the sense of being a polluting person is a major achievement of the Buddhist conversion”.<sup>6</sup> Indeed this is the great lead in their mental make-up. It is important to bear in mind that the psychological change is basic to other changes in various other fields. The credit for all this must naturally go to Dr. Ambedkar.

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<sup>6</sup> Zelliott, Eleanor. Op.cit. p 323

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