
**Dr. AMBEDKAR, ETHICS AND CONVERSION: A CONCEPTUAL
REFLECTION**

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Dr. B.R. Ambedkar an extra ordinary man with outstanding and incomparable ability successfully overcame arduous and intimidating obstructions that a prejudiced and discriminatory society presents in the life of individuals. He desired to impart a systematic and comprehensive insight of religious and moral order in the society. Critical of the conventional and unethical practices in religions like Hinduism, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism as well, he ruled out the idea of prescription of certain rules as well as Naimitika Karmas-daily observance as having to do anything to do with ethical order of the society (Ambedkar, B.R. 1995: 32-33). In fact, Dr. Ambedkar proposed to develop and institute an ethical and moral order based on principles and not rules which many religion adhere to (Joseph 2013: 15-16). Reasoning on scientific basis and its central standing for the idea of equality were the reasons reason why Dr. Ambedkar embraced Buddhism. Buddhism for him sought to achieve equality, liberty and fraternity. Therefore, it should be noted that, “he admitted shudras to the bhikkhu sangha and women could become bhikkhunis. Buddha was not prepared to give up his opposition to the doctrine of Chaturvarna. His opposition took the string out of the justification for chaturvarna” (Joseph 2013:16). In this backdrop this article seeks to explore Ambedkar’s idea of ethics affecting his voyage of conversion to Buddhism

Revival of Buddhism in the Modern India is the process of growing and developing the reminiscence seed of Buddhism in the Indian soil. Dr. Ambedkar in his capacity and for the cause of liberation of untouchables attempted to revive Buddhism in India. This revival of Buddhism in Modern India by Dr. Ambedkar can well be understood by studying genesis of his conversion to Buddhism, course of conversion to Buddhism, his writings and speeches regarding conversion and revival of Buddhism and impact of his conversion on Buddhism.

Reasoning on scientific basis and raising the consciousness of the untouchables so as to make them adopt religious based identity based on 'the religion of principles'. The ethical and moral domain behind the attempt of religious conversions of Dr. Ambedkar was to provide them a sense of sociality and civility for the entire humanity, to put it in the words of Joseph, "the religion for civil society as a whole; not just for the untouchables alone. As 'religion for civil society', it is a religion for the modern person which consists in ideals that sustain sociality" (Joseph 2013: 18). Dr. Ambedkar's by conversion wanted to put an end to 'isolationism' of the marginalized community so as to boost their sense of self-esteem. So, the endeavor of conversions has more to do with upward mobility and less to do with hostile attitude towards religion

The context of Conversion

Dr. Ambedkar's idea of conversion should be examined in larger perspective. He was an advocate of human rights and aimed to guarantee human dignity and social justice to those who were subjugated and repressed and were at the lowermost strata of the hierarchical caste structure. He felt that it was not the British Raj rather it was the caste system which had crippled the country. Initially Dr. Ambedkar intended to restructure the Hindu religion from within and made efforts to give legitimacy to Dalits in Hindu society but it received opposition from the upper castes. The first protest Mahad Satyagraha in 1927, wherein the Mahads of Konkan Reigon of Maharashtra were denied drinking water from a public tank in Chowdar. was unsuccessful and in retaliation Dr. Ambedkar denounced the Manusmriti and in frustration declared that Hinduism in itself had become controversial and contemplated change in the religion. On March 2, 1930, Dr. Ambedkar

in 1930 organized Nasik Satyagraha which was in response to the denial of entry in temples to untouchables for many centuries in Nasik. But its fate was the same. Just like Mahad Satyagraha the Nasik Satyagraha ended up in dispute between the untouchables and the Hindus.

The scheduled castes in Maharashtra is around 5.63 per cent. Among the SCs the main castes are Mahar, Mang, Chambhar, Bhangi, Dhor and Holar. The “first three together constitute more than 90 per cent of the total scheduled caste population” (Patwardhan 1968:188). It is to be noted that the quest for upper mobility among the marginalised castes in the history of Maharashtra can be traced back to the efforts of Holars. They happened to be the first who sought to move upward in terms of their occupation. As Patwardhan notes, “their initial attempts were to establish their position as an untouchable community and as shoe makers” (Patwardhan 1968:188). Whereas the case of Mahars has been different. They had started organising under the local leaderships to raise voices to save their ‘Vatan Right’ and right to services in the military. However, under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar, the movement of marginalised castes and particularly Mahars were revitalised with new meanings, objectives, ethics and politics.

A significant transformation in the demography of the Mahars had started taking place in the context of Maharashtra from early to mid-20th century onwards. As Patwardhan highlights, according to 1931 census, there was 1,046,026 Mahars and in 1941 they were 46.33 percent ¹ of the total scheduled caste population. The 1961 census does not give wise figures for the Mahars, and in 1956, lakhs of them were converted to Buddhism. The total population of Buddhists in 1995 Maharashtra was 2,487 which is 0.01 per cent of the total population whereas the 1961 figure is 2,789,501 which is 7.05 per cent of total population” (Patwardhan, 1968:189)

Intrinsic Value of Conversion

Buddhism for him sought to achieve equality, liberty, freedom and fraternity. It opposed disparity and dissection within the society which he said was the creation of Brahmanism. Morality, equality

¹ D. K. Baisantry (1991), “Ambedkar - the Total Revolutionary”, New Delhi: Segment Book Distributors, p. 100.

and fraternity were the tenets which Buddha taught and stated that it should not sanctify or make virtue out of poverty. After making comparative study of various religion he came to the conclusion that it was the best as it taught freedom social, political and intellectual, equality not only between man and man but also between men and women.

Apart from the teachings of Buddhism, what attracted Dr. Ambedkar towards Buddhism was its casteless characteristic. D.K. Baisantry observed “though the morality of Buddhism influenced Dr. Ambedkar’s judgment, it is this religion’s stands for casteless and classless society convinced him to come to embrace it”.

More than rejecting religion the reason behind conversion was putting an end to the discriminatory practices against untouchables and facilitating and paving ways for their upper social, economic and political mobility.

As for centuries because of the caste system the untouchables had been subject to copious distress so what required was freedom from this bondage and to Dr. Ambedkar Buddhism was the only way out as it fulfilled his criteria of a casteless religion There were two ways which could ensure upward mobility one was Sanskritization and the other was by religious conversion.

Dr. Ambedkar gave his account on religion and Buddhism and expressed that the sanction of law or the sanction of morality holds society together and if it is not there the society will rupture into bits and pieces. Consonance with reason should be there if religion has to survive and this is what makes the religion scientific

Gauri Vishwanathan argues that Sanskritization was a wiser idea than religious conversion now as well. In fact, the early Dalit struggle had focussed on getting access to various religious places such as Pandharpur, Alandi, Jejuri and Tuliapur. However, in the early 1930s Mahars had discarded the imitating higher castes under the influence of the leadership of Ambedkar. Patwardhan notes that, “From the beginning of the thirties, the imitation of the higher caste Hindus

came gradually to be discarded by the Mahars. The Brahmin priest was being eliminated from marriage ceremonies. The final repudiation of Sanskritization and mobility along the traditional axis by Mahars is found in the vows of the Buddhist people. These were the vows administered by Dr. Ambedkar to the five lakhs or more Mahars on 14th October, 1956. They all took their Diksha from him". (Patwardhan 1968:193).

In the current scenario, Patwardhan highlights that "It seems that for upward mobility Sanskritization is no longer effective and relevant as political participation. There has been in motion a complex interaction between the traditional horizon solidarity of the members of a caste group and the solidarity which the compulsions of political processes create. These have affected the internal structure of the Mahar community. There were 52 dogamous sub-castes within the Mahar community in the whole Maharashtra. I found during my survey in 1963 in the city Poona that no Mahar respondent mentioned his sub-caste...Under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar, such attempts were made by the Mahars also. The Mahar Satya graha took place in March 1929 to establish -the right to take water from the well like any other ordinary human being", and the Temple Entry Satyagraha at Kalaram Mandir in Nasik was in 1930." (Patwardhan 1968: 195-97).

Though Dr. Ambedkar changed his method of bringing upper mobility for the untouchables since his first clear cut declaration in 1936 that he was born a Hindu but won't die a Hindu, but his declaration need to be given right and positive interpretation. Joseph notes that, "Ambedkar's conception of the Dhamma as set out in "The Buddha and his Dhamma" corresponds in many ways to the idea of 'civil religion'. His focus is on a humanist and social religion" (Joseph 2013: 21). His attempt of connecting the idea of 'civil religion' was nothing but an endeavour to create a higher pedestal of moral standard in the context of religion i.e. 'civil religion' for the good of all. Such conviction has been traced back by Joseph from the writings of JJ Rousseau, his idea of [religion civile] and letter by John Dewey and Robert Bellah. (Joseph 2013: 21). To understand more clearly how Dr. Ambedkar argues for a high moral standard through the process of conversion- Joseph quotes John Dewey that, "Dewey proposes the idea of a secular religion. He sees modernity as

liberating religion from the shackles of dogma and institutional patterns. He ventured to cull out the rational core of all religious attitudes and called it 'the common faith of all (hu)mankind' (Fuchs, 2001). His idea of such a secular religion was on an imaginative plane and beyond the idea of the 'national religion'. The core of such a religion is in the power of ideals and values.” (Joseph 2013: 21)

Though did not take name of any particular religious tradition, similarly in the initial period Dr. Ambedkar also was silent on the alternative religion. But with the time he was able to bulid a discourse on alternative religion i.e Buddhism. Joseph argues that, “Ambedkar there is an exposition of a universalist religion as foundation of society as embodied in the Dhamma. He interpreted the Dhamma as a system of principles fundamental to sociality transcending all religious distinctions. The Dhamma overcomes the cleft between religion and politics, morality and society. The dilemma of such an understanding of religion is how it can get the emotional commitment of the common population.” (Joseph 2013: 21-22)

Finally, it can be also seen in Dr. Ambedkar ideals that his vision of Dhamma was a means for the emancipation of the people in a democratic and ethical ways. “In the first place the conversion to the Dhamma became caste-specific to a large extent. Obviously, Dr. Ambedkar addressed his ideas of the Dhamma as a social religion not just to the untouchables but to the general public. As yet, such an understanding of the Dhamma has not found wider acceptance. Probably this may be because Buddhism as such had a very insignificant presence in Modern India” (Joseph 2013: 22).

Thus, it can be concluded that, Dr. Ambedkar’s purpose behind conversion was not an antagonistic approach rather the wanted to build a society, economy, polity and culture on a high-level moral, ethical and democratic standard.

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