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## **DR. AMBEDKAR'S JOURNEY FROM HINDUISM TO BUDDHISM : SOME ISSUES**

### ***Abstract***

*This paper attempts to analyse some of the issues related to conversion done by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. This paper analyses not only the views presented by Dr. Ambedkar on various religions but also discusses the effects of conversion done by him. This paper also analyses the effects of various scholars on Dr. Ambedkar thoughts. Born in a family of Mahar, an untouchable caste of Hindu religion of Maharashtra, Ambedkar made untouchables aware and showed them the way to fight untouchability with the help of conversion. It is noteworthy that Dr. Ambedkar left Hinduism in 1956 and accepted Buddhism. Dr. Ambedkar's journey from Hinduism to Buddhism has been the subject of discussion among social scientist. This paper also attempts to underline this discussion as well.*

**Keywords:** *Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Buddhism, Conversion, Hinduism.*

### **Introduction**

Ambedkar's vision of Dalits was of a structural connotation which is different from others. His ideas on social justice and equality has been acclaimed throughout the world. He said that no legal system can promote justice unless its efforts as the bare minimum : (a) access to justice; (b) expeditious justice; (c) inexpensive justice; and (d) effective justice (Singh, 2013). Ambedkar said that untouchability was not a social problem but fundamentally a political problem. Hence, he launched his revolutionary movement for the liberation & advancement of Dalits. He motivated Dalits with the slogan 'educate, organise and agitate'. In this manner, he brought the issue of untouchability to center stage of Indian politics (Chaudhury, 2013).

### **Background of Ambedkar's conversion**

The main objective of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's writings and active efforts by him is to free the untouchable castes from the institutional slavery and atrocities of Indian caste system. The thoughts of Dr. Ambedkar were influenced

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by the views of different social reformers who incubated social reform movements to abolish untouchability pervading the caste system in India. Some of the significant being Shri Narayana Guruswamy, founder of 'Shri Narayana Dharma Paripalalan Sabha', Jyotiba Phule of Satya Shodhak Samaaj and Chhatrapati Shahuji Maharaj of Kolhapur. He was also deeply influenced by Karl Marx and the Self Respect Movement executed by Ramaswamy Naicker. Though the movement by Naicker wore a separatist outlook in its initial terms demanding distinct regions for abolishing caste untouchability and preserving equality, but, the movement against untouchability by Dr. Ambedkar was within the limits of India. In the beginning, Dr. Ambedkar voiced for equality in Hinduism, however, later he decided to adopt Buddhism to complement his desire of equality.

Dr. Ambedkar was running his movement against untouchability in caste system. He faced a lot of obstacles in this movement. The issue of 'Chavdar Tank' had a significant impact on his movement. Due to the impact of this issue, Dr. Ambedkar came to the conclusion that Hindu system is not ready to change the unequal structure of caste system. In August 1923, Bombay Legislative Council passed a resolution that people from the depressed classes should be allowed to use places which were built and maintained by the Government. In January 1924, Mahad, which was part of the Bombay province passed the resolution in its municipal council to enforce the act. But it was failed to implement because of the protest from the savarna (upper caste) Hindus. In 1927, Ambedkar decided to launch a satyagraha (nonviolent resistance) to assert their rights to use water in the public places. Mahad, a town in Konkan, was selected for the event. Mahad Satyagraha or Chavdar Tale Satyagraha was a satyagraha led by B. R. Ambedkar on 20 March 1927 to allow untouchables to use water in a public tank in Mahad (currently in Rajgad district), Maharashtra. This satyagraha had revolutionary implications, as Dalit had not been allowed to access the public water tank in the village until then. The day (20 March) is observed as Social Empowerment day in India.

On 13<sup>th</sup> Oct., 1935, Dr. Ambedkar at the Council of Untouchables held at Yewla declared for his conversion to Buddhism. Though before 1935, he had been criticizing the evils in Hindu society which remarked a segment of it untouchable. A speech drafted by Dr. Ambedkar for the session at Lahore in 1936 is pertinent to understand his religion centric thoughts. He commented there in....." As a Hindu, this is my last acknowledged statement before the Hindu audience." On 15<sup>th</sup> May, 1936, it was published widely by the title Annihilation of Caste. Dr. Ambedkar formally took to conversion in Nagpur on 14<sup>th</sup> Oct. 1956. During his profound struggle of 20 years, he concluded that the untouchables can acquire equality in terms only when they imbibe to Bauddha Dhamma. He also studied different religious texts and deliberately chose a supreme religion. His greater quest of a religion for welfare paved the way for Bauddha Dhamma making him adopt it alongwith his followers. Many

analysts point out that the journey of Ambedkar unveils several issues of glaring significance, analysis on the same is presented in the paper herewith.

### **Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi**

While acclaiming his thoughts, Dr. Ambedkar came across clashes in opinions with Mahatma Gandhi a number of times that had brought more clarity in his thoughts. In 1936, after the publication of his widely acknowledged work 'Annihilation of Castes', the course took to longer correspondence between Mahatma Gandhi and Ambedkar which resulted in a major shift in thoughts enjoying mutual respect. In the matters on endogamy and commensality, Ambedkar gained the support from Gandhi and in turn was influenced by the latter. However, before this concordance, a sheer discord had stricken between Gandhi and Ambedkar on the issue of Ramsay MacDonald award. Once Mahatma Gandhi was asked about the reason behind Ambedkar being of sheer criticism against him many a times to what he asserted that the poignant criticism in Ambedkar's thoughts have never offended him because being born in a Dalit family, Dr. Ambedkar has been through thick and thins which Gandhi never ascertained to. Thus, his criticism is a let-off to me.

### **Ambedkar's thoughts on Hindu Religion and Caste system**

Rao Sahab Kasbe (2009) opines that a deep contemplation was involved behind Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's decision on conversion. So his act of abdicating Hinduism was a very responsible act. After assessing his thoughts, it can be said that it wasn't the ill-treatment by the upper caste Hindus responsible for the discontent among Ambedkar and the people alike, else, he would have avenged by converting himself to Islam or Christianity. His movement on conversion was a Great Awakening. He had already given up his faith in the Hindu philosophy and was deliberately looking for an alternative. It would be difficult to ascertain the structure of Ambedkar's movement on conversion and assay his political thoughts without discovering the reason why did he imbibe the philosophy of Buddha that was earlier discarded by many philosophers to be 'Dharma' in 19<sup>th</sup> century. His movement on conversion wasn't a distinct one, but a part of the original. Dr. Ambedkar firmly believed in Parliamentary democracy, he was a socialist in spirit which led him recommend the idea of socialism to the constituent assembly as an indispensable one. He advocated the idea of planned economy and discarded the Right to Property as a Fundamental Right. Hence, before evaluating further the thoughts on conversion, it is significant to acknowledge his religion centric thoughts.

While explaining the philosophy of Hinduism, Dr. Ambedkar (1936) has discussed the aspects of caste system, a pivot element in Hinduism, discursively. He has deeply remarked on the facts related to the birth of caste, its nature, its influence, etc. He has also raised several questions on the origin

of castes leading to the practice of untouchability, its existence and also tried to offer resolutions on it. Who were Shudras? How was untouchability born? What is its form and structure? What was the source of Chaturvarnya system in Indo-Aryan society? He explored diligently different religious texts to Puranas, narratives, novels, archaic, etc. and incorporated the same in his writings (especially Manusmriti) making this basis for analysis. Indeed, Ambedkar also analysed the social philosophy inherent in Indian social system upon which rests the caste system.

Dr. Ambedkar (1936) associated the Dalits with Shudras who were ranked lower in the four-fold classification of the Varna system or Chaturvarnya system. He raised significant question on the identity of Shudras. Dr. Ambedkar wrote that the Shudras originated from the four-fold classification of Varna system (the Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras) based on a hierarchical order of higher and lower strata. He wrote further that to acknowledge it a system of classification of society would be a flaw because it contained statutory and punitive provisions. Though, he had been of the view that societies across the world have been stratified, among the Hindus the stratification exists in the form of four-fold divisions based upon the principle of hierarchy with Shudras being the lowest in order. He also believed that creation of the Varna system in Hindu society was on religious grounds and was absolute. It was engendered and being divine and pure, it could not be changed. Ambedkar refuted it. The Varnas are categorized on professional grounds and its infringement would lead to punishment. In the words of Ambedkar, it's the inequality in the Varna system that gave rise to slavery in the Hindu society.

Ambedkar has related inequality, the essence in Hinduism to the cause for the prevalence of untouchability in Hindu society. He lamented that the thoughts in Hinduism ordained to practice untouchability in a segment of the society and also obligated the untouchables to restore the pure and divine values associated to it. Ambedkar has reviewed the theories of different theorists on birth of castes, such as Notion of Desecration by M. Senant, Racial Theory by Risley, Commercial Theory by Nesfield and Intercaste Commensal Restrictions by Ketkar and found these erroneous and unreasonable. In the opinion of Ambedkar, the birth of castes is credited to endogamy and he has validated this by taking references from Manusmriti. In the words of Ambedkar, "Caste is an absolute and permanent entity created ostensibly by dividing the masses in general and integrated by the practice of endogamy."

Ambedkar said that justice is synonymous to liberty, equality and fraternity. He further adds that if people share equality, they deserve equality in fundamental rights and liberty. While writing an overview on Hinduism and Hindu social system, in the context of equality and justice, Ambedkar has shunned the caste system as an institution shadowed by inequality and injustice. Citing Manusmriti, he commented that caste system is based on the

principles of Manu which propagates inequality. It is based on the hierarchy of upper and lower castes. This hierarchy places Brahmans on the topmost, followed by Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras being the lowermost. Below Shudras are Atishudras referred as untouchables. In the words of Ambedkar, the system advocates the principles of inequality. Thus, we can conclude that Ambedkar rejected the notion of equality in Hinduism. To validate his viewpoint, Ambedkar cited the examples of bondage system, marriage and legislations.

Dr. Ambedkar had refuted the racial theories on caste system. He remarked, "The truth is that the caste system in India would have emerged from the mix of blood and culture of different races. To consider that castes originated from the division of races and the number of castes equate the races would be a wrong interpretation. Do the Brahmans of Punjab and of Madras share racial similarities? Similarly, are the untouchables of Bengal and of Madras racially similar? Are the Brahmans of Punjab and the Chamaars racially different? The Brahmans of Punjab and the Chamaars are racially similar? The Brahmans of Madras are of the same race to which Periyar belong to. Therefore, caste system does not lead to racial division. Infact, it is a social division of people of similar traits (Ambedkar, 1936)"

According to Ambedkar, Hinduism is the cause of inequality. The division in the Varna system of Hinduism represents inequality in form and structure which can be witnessed in the sanskaars and ashram system, the pillars of the Hindu lifestyle. Ambedkar stated that the Dwij Varnas (the Brahmans, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas) are obligated to imbibe and follow Sanskaaras and some of these such as Diksha or Upnayana Sanskaaras are forbidden to Shudras. Similarly, only the higher Dwij Varnas were privileged to perform yagyas. Shudras could only practice a few sanskaaras but the chanting of hymns was prohibited to them. Ambedkar questioned on the reservations of sanskaaras to Dwij Varnas. Also as to why the Shudras were deprived of the Sanskaaras? He lamented upon why the Shudras can't desire God? Adding to it, he questioned if everyone is equal to God, then why does inequality exists on earth. (BAWS III.)

While commenting on the Code of Conduct of Manu, Ambedkar stated that the objective of this doctrine has been to enslave Shudras and deprive them of seeking education, commerce, social security and owning property. The system ostracized the Shudras to live a life of servility and be a means to attain the means of others. The caste system is also charged with propagating deep ignorance among a larger segment of Hindu society in Shudras by depriving them of the Right to Education. The provision laid down by Manu gives highest position to the Brahmins in the order.

Ambedkar corroborates the feeling of superiority in Brahmanism by the thoughts presented in Manusmriti. Citing the thoughts of Manu, Ambedkar enunciates caste system as a system of slavery limited to Shudras servile to

the three superior Varnas (Brahmins, Kshatriyas & Vaishyas). He outrightly rejects the notion of higher castes being servile to the Shudras in this system. A Brahmin can be a servant to the other Brahmin, a Kshatriya can be the same either to a Brahmin or a Kshatriya, a Vaishya can act the same either to a Vaishya, a Brahmin or a Kshatriya, however, a Shudra is always a servant not only to the other Shudra, but also to either of the Varnas, but cannot enslave either of the three (Ambedkar, 1936).

Dr. Ambedkar opines further that the characteristic of inequality in the Indian caste system has advanced the feeling of competitiveness and hatred for the sake of eminence. The first shlok from Purushsukta of Rigveda is a glaring example of this which presents the origin of Shudras from the nether of the Brahma, the Creator. Ambedkar reiterates that statements of similar kind can be found in other religious texts. While making the comparison of the status of inequality pervading in the caste system of India, Ambedkar finds that in the other social systems of the world, inequality has been the product of historical repercussions, however, in India it is bred in religiously being imparted as a divine and pure theory.

Ambedkar has enumerated several flaws in the caste system –

1. Caste divides labourers;
2. Caste disassociates work from freedom;
3. Caste disconnects intelligence from manual labour;
4. Caste devitalizes by denying to him the right the cultivate vital interest;  
and
5. Caste prevents mobilization.

Caste system is not merely division of labour. *It is also a division of labourers.* Civilized society undoubtedly needs division of labour. But in no civilized society of labour accompanied by this unnatural division of labourers into watertights compartments. Caste system is not merely a division of labourers-which is quite different from division of labour-it is a hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other. In no other country is the division of labour accompanied by this gradation of labourers. (BAWS Vol. III)

Ambedkar has advocated at length in his writings abolishing caste system and has deeply analyzed the interrelationship of dharma to its political vehemence. He has severely criticized Hinduism as “Religion of Conduct”, merely an abstract of rituals based on hierarchy and caste untouchability. Caste is the basis of Hinduism and untouchability defines it appropriately. He further added that this cannot be resolved as untouchability is inherent to it. This made him differ from Gandhi who promulgated for the reconstitution of the caste system while Ambareesh advocated for its elimination. In this aspect,

Ambedkar has never regarded inter-caste eating habits and marriages as a resolution for culminating the caste system in India, infact, he was of the opinion to eliminate it on religious grounds. With this he referred to the hierarchy in Hindu ideology based on the notions of purity and untouchability. He firmly believed in the culmination of the caste system which has no scope for amelioration. In the words of Ambedkar, caste is “a mental state” presented in religious texts deftly. To him, the practice of inter-caste marriage is merely a mechanism in the caste system. He writes that ‘inter-caste marriages are prohibited on religious ground, hence values based on religion should be eliminated. He adds that Hindus follow the rules of caste because they are deeply religious and not because these are inhuman or worthless..... therefore, the shastras rendering castes a dharma are inimical than the disciples of it (Ambedkar, 1936).’

Ambedkar has convincingly stated that in the context of social change (caste system in particular), legislation has a pivot role to play. He is of the view that when peace and recommendations fail, legislation should abridge the gap. Ambedkar wasn't convinced to offer violent means for bringing the change, infact, he has considered it irrational to adopt violence as a means for change in the modern era. Here Ambedkar seems against Marx as he has ascertained to peace for the protection of the rights of the less represented. He suggested that legislations should only be exercised when the social, economic and educational reforms are not feasible.

Here it is also important that Dr. Ambedkar has notably argued that the self proclaimed stakeholders should realize the fact that Hinduism is a religion of inequality and the untouchables shall be treated equally. Later, when Ambedkar discovered that the tranquility for the untouchables cannot be restored in the Hindu society, he went on to adopt Bauddha Dhamma. He lamented that Islam and Christianity are faiths on equality, but, the Dalits who converted to either of these couldn't enjoy the privileges. Hence, he concluded that equality in true sense can only be fashioned in Buddha Dhamma.

While justifying conversion to the other faith, Ambedkar criticizes the evils in Hinduism stating – Why do you remain in that religion which does not treat you as human beings? Why do you remain in that religion which does not allow you to educate? Why do you remain in that religion which prohibits you from entering a temple? Why do you remain in that religion which prohibits you from water? Why do you remain in that religion which obstructs you from getting a job? Why do you remain in that religion which insults you at every step? A religion which prohibits righteous relations between man and man is not a religion but a display of force. A religion which does not recognize a man as a human being is not a religion but a disease. A religion which allows the touch of animals but prohibits the touch of human beings is not a religion but a mockery. A religion which precludes one class from education, forbids to accumulate wealth, to bear arms, is not a religion but a mockery of the life of

human beings. A religion that compels the illiterate to the illiterate, and the poor to be poor, is not a religion but a punishment (BAWS 17).

To justify his stand on conversion rationally, Ambedkar has discussed several criticisms against it. He has enumerated criticisms in four points. Four principal objections have been urged by the opponents against the conversion of the Untouchables -

1. What can the Untouchables gain by conversion? Conversion can make no change in the status of the Untouchables.
2. All religions are true, all religions are good. To change religion is a futility.
3. The conversion of the Untouchables is political in its nature.
4. The conversion of the Untouchables is not genuine as it is not based on faith.

It cannot take much argument to demonstrate that the objections are puerile and inconsequential (*BAWS*, Vol. 5).

### **Ambedkar's thoughts on Buddhism and others religions**

Ambedkar feels convinced that the untouchables would get rid of their status after conversion and also that Ambedkar thought of converting to Buddhism due to inequality practiced in terms in Hinduism. He refutes the notion that the idea of conversion is politically opportunist, rather, the faith in the values in Buddha Dhamma attract many.

Dr. M. C. Joshi (2007) claims that Ambedkar has explained at length "Dhamma" in Bauddha Dhamma negating the concept of Dharma in Hinduism. He assimilated that Dhamma establishes values rather than the concept of God. Therefore, according to him, Bauddha Dhamma is a dharma of human sanctity. Dharma views everyone equal. Other than this, kindness and gratitude and not the Varna system are the attributes in Bauddha philosophy. Based on these arguments, Ambedkar resorted to Bauddha Dhamma. He considered Bauddha Dhamma an indispensable part of Indian culture. During the convocation ceremony he stated that "Discarding the filth of inequality and oppression in the religion, I am reborn today escaping myself from the Hell."

Ambedkar did not resort to Buddha Dhamma because he was against Hinduism, in fact, there were some other reasons too. He was in seek to a religion which was not class conscious rather a clan of humanity. He was a philosopher of the age when the communism of the west was gradually spreading in the Indian society. Even Ambedkar himself got influenced with the ideology of communism. He appears Marxist when commenting on the philosophy of Hinduism. He clearly states that "the issue of untouchability is a subject-matter of class struggle." (Ambedkar, as quoted in Ahir, 1990). Michael



(2015) connotes the statement refers to class consciousness and class struggle. Though, Ambedkar was influenced by Marx, but, he never asserted to violent means. He firmly believed in equal distribution of property to all, but, never reclaimed to the use of any violence to reform the caste system. He felt that the communist viewpoint is purely ethical and depends more on violent means and its popularity adverse for humanity. Ambedkar reiterates that Bauddha dhamma could only act as an alternative to Marxism and also to Christianity because Christianity and Bauddha philosophy share the elements of kindness and ethical values.

In his famous essay 'Buddha and future of his religion' (which was first published in 1950 in the monthly magazine of Kolkata's Mahabodhi Society), Dr. Ambedkar has made a comparison in the four dharmas – Bauddha dhamma, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam on various grounds. He had expressed his inclination to Bauddha dhamma after making out this comparison. He has regarded Bauddha dhamma more discretionary, based on principles and most scientific when compared with other dharmas. In 1956 Ambedkar endorsed Buddhism and propagated it as well. To this reference, he admitted that religion is a preference or choice and can be maneuvered to change. Indirectly his thoughts render the notion of 'Freedom of Religion' which propounds the political theory mentioned in our constitution. Ambedkar (1957) has broadly analysed values and ethics. With this he meant the ideas of liberal in thoughts, sensitivity to others, caring for peers, conscious to the natural world, contain the sense of duty and obligations and being resolute to the well being of the world around. Dr. Ambedkar believed that values born of a person's wisdom lead to fraternity than obligations born out of sanskaaras.

Ambedkar compares the founders of these four religions – Hindu, Islam, Christianity and Buddhism. 'Ambedkar starts by stating that what separates Buddha from the rest of the other is his self-abnegation (Siddhartha, 2019).' Ambedkar writes that "All throughout the Bible, Jesus insists that he is the son of God and those who wish to enter the kingdom of God will fail, if they do not recognize him as the son of God. Muhammad went a step further. Like Jesus he also claimed that he was the messenger of God. But he further insisted that he was the last messenger. Krishna went a step beyond both Jesus and Muhammad. He refused to be satisfied with merely being the Son of the God or being the messenger of God : he was not content even with being the last messenger of God. He was not even satisfied with calling himself a God. He claimed that he was 'Parmeshwar' or as his followers describe him "Devadhideva", God of Gods," Ambedkar writes about them. But Buddha, he wrote, "was born as a son of man and was content to remain a common man and preached his gospel as a common man (Siddhartha, ibid). According to Ambedkar, Buddha never claimed any divine power. Buddhism is a human religion and there is no any place for God in Buddhism. Jesus, Muhammad and Krishna claimed for themselves the Mokshadata. The Buddha was satisfied

with playing the role of a “Margdata” or “Path-giver” and not “Moksha-Data” (Krishna Dutta Paliwal, 2016).

Dr. Ambedkar also made a comparison on the four dharmas on another distinct ground. He professed that Jesus and Mohammad have claimed on their narrative being a divine speech. Krishna being the Lord himself, thus, his sermons are divine in itself too. Hence, these seats of learning are regarded as the ultimate truth. However, Buddha himself is of the opinion that such learning is attributive to change conditioned upon time and other factors. Dr. Ambedkar mentioned that Bauddha dhamma is based upon the ideals of equality and non-violence. Buddha inherited the Shudras to Bauddha dhamma and also the women which is of a great value to Ambedkar. He endorsed his struggles against inequality. He sought profoundly the virtue of equality which he later discovered in Bauddha dhamma.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar prescribed 22 vows to his followers during the historic religious conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism on 14 October 1956 at Dhiksha Bhoomi, Nagpur in India.

With reference to the vows made by Dr. Ambedkar, the objectives behind his work for taking up conversion and the roadmap can be clearly ascertained. The famous 22 vows are (Krishna Dutta Paliwal, 2016) –

1. I shall have no faith in Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh nor shall I worship them.
2. I shall have no faith in Rama and Krishna who are believed to be incarnation of God nor shall I worship them.
3. I shall have no faith in Gauri, Ganpati and other gods and goddesses of Hindus nor shall I worship them.
4. I do not believe in the incarnation of God.
5. I do not and shall not believe that Lord Buddha was the incarnation of Vishnu. I believe this to be sheer madness and false propaganda.
6. I shall not perform ‘Shraddha’ nor shall I give ‘pind-dan’.
7. I shall not act in a manner violating the principles and teachings of the Buddha.
8. I shall not allow any ceremonies to be performed by Brahmins.
9. I shall believe in the equality of man.
10. I shall endeavour to establish equality.
11. I shall follow the ‘noble eightfold path’ of the Buddha.
12. I shall follow the ‘paramitas’ prescribed by the Buddha.

13. I shall have compassion and loving kindness for all living beings and protect them.
14. I shall not steal.
15. I shall not tell lies.
16. I shall not commit carnal sins.
17. I shall not take intoxicants like liquor, drugs etc.
18. I shall endeavour to follow the noble eightfold path and practise compassion and loving kindness in every day life.
19. I renounce Hinduism which is harmful for humanity and impedes the advancement and development of humanity because it is based on inequality and adopt Buddhism as my religion.
20. I firmly believe the Dhamma of the Buddha is the only true religion.
21. I believe that I am having a re-birth.
22. I solemnly declare and affirm that I shall hereafter lead my life according to the principles and teachings of the Buddha and his Dhamma.

Dr. Ambedkar's critics are of the opinion that Ambedkar chose Nagpur because it is the birth place of Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh. Critics were of the view that by making Nagpur a centre, Ambedkar wanted to make popular his conversion politically. However, Ambedkar clarified his decision a day after he converted on 15 October 1956. He said that he had chosen the Nagpur city not for the RSS but for the 'Nag' people, who according to history, spear headed the movement against the Aryan people and also propagated Buddhism. According to Ambedkar Nagpur means 'City of Nags'. In this context Nagpur was chosen by Ambedkar.

### **Impact of Ambedkar's conversion**

Vivek Kumar (2014) says that after Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in 1956 there has been a continuous debate on the future of the relationship between Buddhism and Dalits. According to Beltz, 'It is evident that Ambedkar is the symbol of the new Buddhist identity.....some even look upon him as a divine being' (as quoted in Vivek Kumar, *ibid*). Vivek Kumar (*ibid*) also says that earlier it was found that the illiterate Dalit masses had converted to Buddhism, but now it has been found that more and more literate, employed, and professional people are converting to Buddhism. Kumar (*ibid*) found that even the Dalit diaspora in different countries have organized Buddha Viharas and contributed financial help in the country for constructing Buddha Viharas.

After Dr. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism, under his influence,

there was a movement throughout India which was called the Dalit Buddhist Movement or Neo Buddhist Movement (Ranjit De, 1996). It radically re-interpreted Buddhism and created a new school of Buddhism called Navayana. The movement has sought to be a socially and politically engaged form of Buddhism (Gary, 2003). The movement was launched in 1956 by Ambedkar when nearly half a million Dalits or untouchables joined him and converted to Navayana Buddhism (Skaria, 2015). According to Skaria (2015) "Here (Navayana Buddhism) there is not only a criticism of religion (most of all, Hinduism, but also prior traditions of Buddhism), but also of secularism, and that criticism is articulated moreover as a religion." This movement rejected the teachings of traditional Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions of Buddhism, and took an oath to pursue a new form of engaged Buddhism as taught by Ambedkar (Thomas Pantham and Vrajendra Raj Mehta, 2006).

This Neo Buddhist movement also rejected Hinduism and challenged the caste system. O.M. Lynch (1974) acknowledges this fact in his famous book 'The Politics of Untouchability'. In Lynch's opinion, the Jatavas challenged the core beliefs of Hinduism in their attempt to convert themselves in Buddhism. The Jatavas thus reinforced their intentions to achieve equality. In this way, the Jatavas also challenged the process of "Sanskritization" (Lynch, 1974). While analyzing the impact of Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism, Guru (1991) criticized the spiritualized and Hinduized interpretation of right wing parties and Buddhist organizations like Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayaka Gana (TBMSG) in Maharashtra, which distorted the vision of emancipation in Ambedkar's Buddhism. Guru (ibid) says that "If one looks at Ambedkar's ideology of Buddhism and his idea of conversion, one finds that he created a counter ideology in the form of Neo Buddhism, thereby rejecting not only old Buddhism but also offered a dialectical understanding of Hinduism at the ideological level." Because of this, Guru (ibid) understands Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in terms of a long term emancipatory politics for Dalits where the Gita as a text of obedience for Hindus will be counter cultured by "Buddha and His Dhamma" of Dalits.

Many scholars believe that Neo Buddhist Communities have made an effective presence in contemporary Indian politics, considering Dr. Ambedkar as their ideal. In the politics of Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, this Neo Buddhist Communities has actively participated in power & authority. This Neo Buddhist Community is strengthening the roots of Indian Democracy because of its active participation in Indian politics (Misra, 2018). Today, this Neo Buddhist Community has emerged as pressure group in Indian politics.

## Conclusion

To complete the analysis of this journey of Dr. Ambedkar's conversion, his other thoughts and activities also need to be included. Mungekar (2019) analyses these contributions as follows - "Besides being a social revolutionary,

Ambedkar was a devoted patriot and a great nation builder. For all the disappointment he suffered thanks to the Indian socio-political system, he remains one of the greatest thinkers of renewal worldwide. He dealt with all the burning problems facing the country and provided lasting solutions. Not a single issue that related to India remained untouched by him. As an active intellectual politician, whose carefully evolved ideas are still valid today, Ambedkar had prominently participated in the making of the Indian Constitution as its chief architect. The prime aim and mission of his life was the abolition of caste discrimination from the fabric of India. He wanted to bring the downtrodden and oppressed people freedom from caste-based oppression and untouchability. To this end he challenged the system and fought for structural reforms in the way Indian polity and society was organized." In this manner Ambedkar's ideas influenced many to ponder over the issue of inequity.

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