



## Buddhism and Untouchability in Colonial India

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### **Buddhism: A Dignified Refuse for Untouchables:**

Amongst all, Gandhi's vow to remove the stigma of untouchability from the face of Hindu society was remarkable. His appeal to do away with this age-old practice did not find favor with the hard-core orthodox caste Hindus including leaders like Madan Mohan Malaviya and even many Congress leaders and consequently incurred their wrath. Some of the orthodox Hindus were so enraged with the social reform programme of Gandhi that during the Harijan tour they made an abortive bomb attack to kill him at a meeting in July 1934. But Gandhi seemed determined to intensify his reform programme for he was convinced that with the removal of untouchability Hinduism would automatically get rid of casteism. He, therefore, declared that untouchability was a crime and he made a fervent appeal to the caste Hindus to throw open the temples for Dalits. He was quite optimistic that there would be a change of heart on the part of caste Hindus and in due course they would whole-heartedly welcome Dalits to the temples. He neither encouraged forceful entry of Dalits into the temples nor construction of separate temples for them by the caste Hindus.

Ambedkar's method of approach was different. He firmly believed that the Hindu society has been built on the strong foundation of caste. Uprooting of caste, to him, was the only remedy to liberate Dalits from the horror chamber of hell. He disagreed with Gandhi's belief

that removal of untouchability would automatically end the caste regime. According to Ambedkar, the caste-feeling dominates the Hindu mind and has an adverse effect on the ethics of Hindus. He, therefore, aptly remarked: "Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. A Hindu's public is his caste. His responsibility is only to his caste. Virtue has become caste-ridden and morality has become caste-bound. There is no sympathy to the deserving. There is no appreciation of the meritorious. There is no charity to the needy."<sup>1</sup>

Gandhi dreamt of Varnadharma sans untouchability and caste. But Ambedkar felt that difference between Varnadharma and caste system was not real for the simple reason that the former automatically converts itself into the latter. To Ambedkar, a Hindu is born in caste, grows in caste and dies in caste. His attitudes and behavioral pattern is conditioned and controlled by caste. As rightly observed by him, "To the Hindu, caste is sacred and caste is eternal." The caste interest is so sacrosanct to a Hindu that he does not mind sacrificing his self-interest. Persecution and atrocities perpetrated on Dalits are nothing but criminal manifestations of the caste Hindu mind. The reason for the continuing caste-clashes is two-fold<sup>2</sup>:

- (a) in respect of caste Hindus, it is a fight for caste supremacy; and
- (b) as far as Dalits are concerned, it is a struggle for liberation from the caste



hegemony and tyranny.

In general, it may be said that the survival instinct in caste is the prime mover and the root cause of all caste conflicts. It has been witnessed that due to Gandhi's mass movement and Ambedkar's fierce fight, untouchability in physical form is slowly fading away. But caste is still manifest in every activity of a Hindu thus establishing the fact that caste is omnipotent and omnipresent among Hindus. Casteism and sub-Casteism have found deep roots in Hindu social Order. Despite spread of education, the plight of Dalits continues unabated. One of the greatest reasons for its continuity is that caste has the religious sanction of Shastras as no Hindu still dares to violate the dictates of Shastras and Manusmriti. As mentioned above, Ambedkar advocated annihilation of caste and eradication of untouchability. He appealed to the conscience of every Hindu to cast off caste but of no avail. He was, therefore, convinced that as long as the caste has the sanction of Hindu religion, it would be impossible to annihilate caste. Hence he gave a clarion call to bid good-bye to Hinduism.

In this context, Ambedkar observed: "The taste of a thing can be changed. But the poison cannot be made Amrit. The talk of annihilating the caste is like talking of changing the poison into Amrit. In short, so long as we remain in a religion which teaches a man to treat another man as a leper, the sense of discrimination on account of caste which is deep rooted in our minds cannot go. For annihilating caste and removal of untouchability from among Dalits, change of religion is the only antidote." 3

#### **Logic of Conversion:**

After Ambedkar declared his intension to quit Hinduism in order to convert into

any other religion, he was faced with a number of objections from various corners which he took up to respond one by one. The general objections made against the conversion of Dalits are as follows:

- (a) the conversion does not bring any change in the status of Dalits;
- (b) since all religions are true and good, change of religion is an exercise in futility;
- (c) the conversion of Dalits is political in nature; and
- (d) the conversion of Dalits is not genuine as it is not based on faith.

Taking up the objection at (d) above first, Ambedkar observed that history abounds with cases where conversion had taken place without a religious motive. Explaining the nature of conversions to Christianity in the West during the Middle Ages, Rev. Reichel in his book *The Sea of Rome*, gave a very vivid account how such conversions were either prompted by the conversion of the sovereigns in the first instance or by compulsion. 4According to Ambedkar, religion has become a piece of ancestral property which is inherited by a son from his father. He, therefore, argued that if the conversion of Dalits is based on the full deliberation of the value of religion and of the virtue of different religions, it shall be considered as a genuine conversion. According to Ambedkar, there could never be a doubt about the genuineness of conversion of Dalits.

As regards the accusation at (c) above that the conversion of Dalits was political in nature, Ambedkar dismissed it as baseless. He argued that there was a distinction between a gain "being the direct inducement" and "its being only incidental advantage". He further observed that "where a gain is a direct



inducement that conversion could be condemned as immoral or criminal” and if “political gain is incidental gain then there is nothing criminal in conversion.”

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As a matter of fact, in the case of Dalits, the conversion would not confer any extra political rights. Thus, the charge of conversion of Dalits for political gain was “a wild charge made without understanding.”

As regards (b) above, the argument of the opponents of conversion is that since all religions are true and good, there is no case for conversion. It has to be fairly conceded that all religions are “in pursuit of good”. The premise upto this is okay. If the premise goes beyond and asserts that because of this there is no reason to prefer one religion to another becomes a false promise. Religions do differ on the question “what is good?” Ambedkar observed that “religion is a motive force for the promotion and spread of the ‘good’.” One religion holds that brotherhood is good, and another religion holds that caste and untouchability are good. The fact is that all religions do not agree in the means and methods they advocate for the promotion and spread of good. In their pursuit of “good”, some religions advocate violence and the other non-violence. Therefore, all religions are not alike. Ambedkar disagreed with the myth generated by the science of comparative religions to the effect that all religions are good and there is no useful purpose in discriminating them. According to him, a Hindu takes shelter under this myth and attempts to make a case against conversion of Dalits. A Hindu, however, avoids an examination of Hinduism on its merits.

Ambedkar considered the objection at (a) above as a very important

one which needs a serious consideration. This objection is based on the false belief that religion is purely a personal matter between man and God; it is supernatural; and it has nothing to do with social. According to Ambedkar, this argument was no doubt sensible but its foundations were quite false. In his view, the process of life and its preservation constitute the essence of religion. In other words, the end of religion is the conservation and consecration of social life. It is an error to regard religion as a matter which is individual, private and personal. In this context, Ambedkar maintained: “The correct view is that religion like language is social for the reason that either is essential for social life and the individual has to have it because without it he cannot participate in the life of the society.”<sup>6</sup>

By being social in character religion universalizes social values and acts as an agency of social control. In a way, the function of religion is the same as the function of law and Government. According to Prof Ellwood, the religious sanction, on account of being supernatural, is a far more effective means of social control than law and Government. He said: “Religion is the most powerful force of social gravitation without which it would be impossible to hold the social order in its orbit.”<sup>7</sup>

It is, therefore, evident that religion is a social fact; it has a specific purpose and has a definite social function. Hence, if a person is required to accept a religion, he should have the right to ask how well it served the purpose. According to Ambedkar, Dalits are entitled to ask the protagonists of Hinduism the following pertinent questions:<sup>8</sup>

- (a) “Does Hinduism recognize their worth as human beings?”



- (b) “Does it stand for their equality?”
- (c) “Does it extend to them the benefit of liberty?”
- (d) “Does it at least hold to forge the bond of fraternity between them and the Hindus?”
- (e) “Does it teach the Hindus that Dalits are their kindred?”
- (f) “Does it say to the Hindus it is a sin to treat Dalits with contempt?”
- (g) “Does it tell Hindus to be righteous to Dalits?”
- (h) “Does it preach to the Hindus to be just and humane to them?”
- (i) “Does it inculcate in the Hindus the virtue of being friendly to them?”
- (j) “Does it tell the Hindus to love them, to respect them and to do them no wrong?”
- (k) “Does Hinduism universalize the value of life without distinction?”

The answers to all these questions must be in the negative. Ambedkar, therefore, observed: “No Hindu can dare to give an affirmative answer to any of these questions. On the contrary the wrongs to which Dalits are subjected by the Hindus are acts which are sanctioned by the Hindu religion. They are done in the name of Hinduism. The spirit and tradition which makes lawful the lawlessness of the Hindus towards the Hindus is founded and supported by the teachings of Hinduism.”<sup>9</sup>

Ambedkar further remarked: “How can Dalits stay in Hinduism? Untouchability is the lowest depth to which the degradation of the human being can be carried. To be poor is bad but not so bad as to be an Untouchable. The low can rise above his status. An Untouchable cannot. To be suffering is bad but not so bad as to be an Untouchable. They shall someday be comforted. An Untouchable cannot hope

for this.”<sup>10</sup> Ambedkar explicitly declared that there are two reasons why Dalits should quit Hinduism. They are – (a) there is no hope for Dalits for remaining in Hinduism; and (b) untouchability is a part and parcel of Hinduism.

Ambedkar adds that a caste Hindu can proudly claim that he is a Hindu because it enhances his sense of superiority by the reason of his consciousness that there are millions of Dalits below him. But how about a Dalit? To say that he believes in Hinduism and to proclaim that he is a Hindu means automatic acceptance of his low social status at the cost of his self-respect. Therefore, Ambedkar was forthright in saying that Hinduism was inconsistent with self-respect and honor of Dalits. That itself is the strongest ground which justifies the conversion of Dalits to another and nobler faith.<sup>11</sup> In order to get themselves liberated, Ambedkar believed, Untouchables needed to do two things: (i) firstly, they must end their social isolation; and (ii) secondly, they must end their inferiority complex. According to Ambedkar, conversion does meet these two needs.

#### **(i) Social Isolation:**

The consequences of social isolation have been explained by Ambedkar himself in the following words: “Isolation means social segregation, social humiliation, social discrimination and social injustice. Isolation means denial of protection, denial of justice, denial of opportunity. Isolation means want of sympathy, want of fellowship and want of consideration. Nay, isolation means positive hatred and antipathy from the Hindus. By having kinship with other community on the one hand, Untouchables will have within that



community equal position, equal protection and equal justice, and on the other will be able to draw upon its sympathy, its good-will.”<sup>12</sup>

The one and only way for Untouchables to end their social isolation is to establish kinship and get themselves incorporated into another community which is free from the spirit of caste. Ambedkar also holds that this argument can be appreciated only by those who know the value and significance of kinship. Innumerable benefits flow from kinship. From the point of a group of community, kinship calls for a feeling that one is first and foremost a member of the group or community and not merely an individual. From the point of view of individual, the advantages are akin to those that accrue to the members of a family which is characterized by parental tenderness. Inside the community there is no discrimination among those who are bound by the ties of kinship. As a matter of fact, kinship makes the community take the responsibility for vindicating the wrong done to a member. This manifestation of sympathetic resentment is a compound of tender emotion towards its members and anger against the adversaries. It is kinship which generates this sympathetic resentment. Kinship is absent between caste Hindus and Dalits. Therefore, a Dalit, on conversion, derives immense benefit from his kinship with another community.

The next pertinent question, to Ambedkar is – how to forge the bond of kinship? According to him, the bond of kinship can be forged by means of a religion which believes in inter-dining and inter-marriage. In his view kinship is a social covenant of brotherhood. Ambedkar was of the firm belief that

mere common citizenship would not end the social isolation and troubles of Dalits. Kinship, Ambedkar was emphatic, was the only cure and there was no other way except to embrace the religion of the community whose kinship they seek.

#### **(ii) Inferiority Complex:**

Centuries of old social isolation, discrimination and unfriendliness have not only generated a feeling of helplessness among Dalits but also created a deep-rooted obnoxious psychology of inferiority complex. Since the religion in which they are born has treated them as worthless degraded outcasts and denied the equality of status, Dalits have developed a feeling of pessimism which is at the root of their inferiority complex. To Ambedkar, there is only one cure for this malady – a right kind of religion, which recognizes an individual as a fellow human being and provides an atmosphere of equal opportunities, would certainly cure this psychology of inferiority complex on the part of Dalits. The most important question is whether conversion raises the general social status of Dalits. Ambedkar was very emphatic in his assertion that there could be no two opinions on this, but much depends upon the religion which they choose.

#### **Buddhism as a last option:**

After getting disillusioned with Hinduism, Ambedkar turned towards other existing religions and having keenly examined into Christianity, Islam, Sikhism and Buddhism, he came to conclusion that Buddhism is the last and best option for the Untouchables. He also discussed in detail as to why Christianity, Islam and Sikhism are not so useful and at places even harmful for the Untouchables. Regarding Christianity, Ambedkar was of the opinion that even after conversion Indian christens were



not free from the caste influences and dalit Christians were ill-treated by the other Christians. Besides, even after conversion the socio-economic conditions of Dalit-Christians were not improved and there were many road-blocks to their higher education. As regards Islam, Ambedkar not only gave a good number of reasons for why Untouchables should not embrace Islam but also actively urged the untouchables in Pakistan not to adopt Islam under any circumstances. There are many reasons he cited for not adopting Islam, for instance, firstly he did not wish Untouchables to go out of Indian Culture. Secondly, he thought that conversion to Islam would denationalize untouchables. Thirdly, Muslims in India are divided into three classes, viz. Ashraf (higher class Muslims), Ajlaf (lower class Muslims) and Arzal (degraded Muslims), with a social precedence which is akin to the Caste system. Fourthly, the Indian Muslims are afflicted by the same social evils of the Hindus. In addition, they have a compulsory system of *Purdah* for the Muslim women. Fifthly, the condition of a Muslim woman is very pathetic being deprived of all freedoms. Sixthly, Islam believes in social self-government and not a local self-government. By this reason, Islam inhibits an Indian Muslim to adopt India as his motherland. Lastly, Islam preaches brotherhood of Muslims for Muslims only and not universal brotherhood.<sup>13</sup>

These are the reasons for his distancing from these religions and coming closure to Buddhism. In 1950, Ambedkar contributed an article titled “The Buddha and the Future of His Religion” which was published in the *Vaishakha* Number (April-May) of *Mahabodhi*. This article gives a clue as to why he finally chose Buddhism.

Ambedkar explains here how the Buddha, unlike Krishna, Jesus and Mohammed, did not claim divinity or supernatural origin or supernatural powers; how he did not claim himself Mokshadata but satisfied by playing the role of Margadata; how he did not promise Heaven; how he was merely concerned with “this world” and not the “other world”; how he did not claim infallibility for his teachings; how his teachings were based on reason and experience; how Buddhism was founded on morality; how it was free from the evil of inequality; and finally explained how Buddhism satisfied the three requirements of religion, viz, that it was in accordance with science, it recognized the fundamental tenets of liberty, equality and fraternity, and did not sanctify or ennoble poverty. Ambedkar attempted to dispel the mistaken impression that the only thing Buddha taught was Ahimsa or non-violence. Ambedkar emphasized that besides Ahimsa, the Buddha taught social freedom, economic freedom, political freedom, equality not only between man and man but also between man and woman. Ambedkar further explained that to realize the ideal of spreading Buddhism three things were needed to be done – (a) to produce a Buddhist Bible, (b) to make changes in the organization, aims and objects of the Bhikku Sangh and to set up a world Buddhist Mission.

Ambedkar visited Ceylon (Srilanka) in 1950 and delivered a speech at Colombo on “The Rise and Fall of Buddhism in India”. Ambedkar observed that the rise of Buddhism was as significant as the French Revolution. Ambedkar was also invited to participate in the third Buddhist World Conference at Rangoon (Burma) in December 1954. Despite falling health, Ambedkar not only attended the



Conference but also gave a thought-provoking speech wherein he appealed to the Burmese and Ceylonese Buddhists to provide monetary help for revival and propagation of Buddhism in India and other countries. He declared that he would propagate Buddhism in India when equipped with proper means. After returning to India, Ambedkar announced to write a book on Buddhism in the simplest language so that even a common man could understand it. He commenced that task in November, 1951 and got about 50 copies of the draft book printed and circulated in February 1956 with the title *The Buddha and His Gospel* for private opinion.

BBC invited Ambedkar in May, 1956 to give a talk on “Why I like Buddhism and how it is useful to the world in its present circumstances?” In the Radio talk, Ambedkar observed: “I prefer Buddhism because it gives three principles in combination which no other religion does. Buddhism teaches Prajna (understanding as against superstition and supernaturalism), Karuna (love) and Samata (equality). This is what a man wants for a good and happy life. Neither God nor soul can save society... Buddhist countries that have gone over to Communism do not understand what Communism is. Communism of the Russian type aims bringing it about by a bloody revolution. The Buddhist Communism brings it about by bloodless revolution. The South-East Asians should be beware of jumping into the Russian net. All that is necessary for them is to give political form to Buddha’s teachings. Poverty there is and there will always be. Even in Russia there is poverty. But poverty cannot be an excuse for sacrificing human freedom. Once it is realized that Buddhism is a social gospel, its revival would be an everlasting

event.”<sup>14</sup>

This suggests that Ambedkar was fascinated by the social relevance of the Buddhist tenets and was convinced that the Buddhism was the most appropriate religion for the untouchables. It was, therefore, natural that he finally opted for Buddhism. On September 14, 1956, Ambedkar issued a press note declaring his decision to embrace Buddhism at Nagpur on October, 14, 1956. Thus it can be said that Ambedkar’s decision to conform to Buddhism was not a decision made in haste or made out of mere anger with Hinduism but it was a well thought-out and keenly examined decision. As Prof Rodrigues holds “A large part of Ambedkar’s writings had a direct bearing on Hinduism, most of which remained unpublished and in the initial draft form during his life-time. In these studies, which he undertook mainly from the second half of 1940s, Ambedkar argued that Buddhism, which attempted to found society on the basis of reason and morality, was a major revolution, both social and ideological, against the degeneration of the Aryan society. It condemned the *Varna system* and gave hope to the poor, the exploited and to women. It rallied against sacrifices, priestcraft and superstition. The Buddhist Sangha became the platform for the movement towards empowering and ennobling the common man. However, Brahmanism struck back against the revolution through the counter-revolution launched by Pushyamitra. Here Ambedkar deployed a specific terminology employed to explain mainstream European transitions of nineteenth and twentieth centuries and he felt that the corresponding explanation was appropriate for India too, although the periods in question were wide apart.”<sup>15</sup>