



Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkars Significant Role in Revival of Buddhism in Modern India

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Content

- 1. Historical Background.....
- 2. Genesis of Babasaheb Ambedkars conversion to Buddhism.....
- 3. Course of Babasaheb Ambedkars conversion to Buddhism.....
- 4. Selected speeches of Babasaheb Ambedkar regarding religion and Buddhism.....
- 5. The Buddhist Society of India.....
- 6. Impact of Babasaheb Ambedkars conversion to Buddhism.....
- 7. Epilogue.....
- Bibliography.....
- Appendix.....

On the occasion of ceremony of conversion to Buddhism in Nagpur on October 14, 1956 Mahasthavir Chandramani initiated Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and Maisaheb Ambedkar to Buddhism. Babasaheb Ambedkar proclaimed that, those who are willing to renounce Hindu religion and embrace Buddhism should stand with folded hands and recite trisharan and panchasheela after him. In response to his proclamation, the whole gathering stood up and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar initiated them to Buddhism. Babasaheb Ambedkar gave 22 oaths to his more than five lakh peoples who were initiated to Buddhism for relieving them from the clutches of Hinduism.

On the occasion of the Conversion to Buddhism in his speech on 15th October 1956 he said , "the reason for choosing this place is different. Those who have studied Buddhist history will come to know that the people who have propagated Buddhism in India were the Nag people. Nag people were the fierce enemy of the Aryans Many forceful battles took place between the Aryans and the Non-Aryans, many examples are available in the Puranas about where the Aryans burnt Nagas. The sage Agasti could save only one naga. We are the descendants of him . The Naga people who tolerated the depression needed some great man to uplift them and they found that great man in lord Gautam Buddha. The Naga propagated the teachings of lord Buddha throughout India. Such are we nagas. The major habitation of the Naga people was in and around Nagpur. Therefore this city is called as "**Nag-pur**" means the city of nagas."

Babasaheb Ambedkar speeches clarifies all the queries regarding conversion to Buddhism. It helps in understanding his religious philosophy Hindu religion which became source of discrimination and human exploitation for thousands of years in India. Needed an answer for social change. Conversion to Buddhism was appropriate solution for social change. He theoretically built up all The favorable environment through his writings and speeches. His speeches prepared the mental set up of depressed classes for Conversion. From May 1924 to 25th November 1956 he delivered various speeches at many places in India and in abroad regarding Buddhism It was out come of his speeches and writings that more than five lakhs people converted to Buddhism on 14th October 1956. It was one of the greatest and biggest conversion to Buddhism in the world. His message that every Buddhist can initiate other's to Buddhism was significant it led to various other conversion to Buddhism in future. It is notable that still the process of conversion to Buddhism is in process. The light that Babasaheb Ambedkar lightened by converting to Buddhism has developed Neo-Buddhist culture in India. His urge of taking help of international Buddhist countries to resolve the issues of Buddhists in India is not well taken and understood by his many of the followers if it is well taken and understood then that will help further in propagation of Buddhism in all over India.

THE BUDDHIST SOCIETY OF INDIA

The Buddhist Society of India was registered by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar on 4th May 1955 in the office of the Registrar of Companies, Mumbai.

On May 8th, 1955 at the function held at Nare Park, Bombay, he made a formal announcement of the establishment of this society for propagation of Buddhism.

Some of the aims and objectives of the society were as follows:

- 1) To promote the spread of Buddhism in India.
- 2) To establish schools and colleges for religious and scientific subjects.
- 3) To establish orphanages, hospitals and relief centers.
- 4) To promote comparative study of all religions.
- 5) To undertake publication of Buddhist literature and to issue leaflets and pamphlets for giving a true understanding of Buddhist religion to the common masses.
- 6) To hold gatherings and conferences of the Buddhists of India for common action and to establish fellowship.

In the history of socio-religious reformation movement in India, many social reformers established various organizations in order to reform Hindu socio-religious structure. Raja Ram Mohan Roy established *Brahmo Samaj*, Mahatma Phuley established *Satyashodhak Samaj*, likewise Dr. Ambedkar along with his other organizations, founded The Buddhist Society of India. It is well known fact that *Chaturvarnya* System in Hinduism never treated untouchables as human beings. Therefore, there was no option for Dr. Ambedkar than to proceed for renouncing Hinduism and finding another option for untouchables for raising their social status as a human being which was denied by Hinduism. Keeping all these things in mind Dr. Ambedkar established this organization. Hinduism is based on negation of democratic values as unequal social stratification of *Chaturvarnya* caused irreparable damage to the overall development of untouchables as human beings for thousands of years. Even the socio-religious reformation movement in modern India failed to change undemocratic, inhuman traditions of Hinduism totally. Till date, the incidents of the practice of Untouchability, *Devdasi*, *Sati*, Dowry, female infanticide etc. are frequently observed from Hindu fold. Dr. Ambedkar in his civil rights movement struggle for realization of social democracy in India founded accordingly The Buddhist Society of India which is considered one of the important organizations in social reformation movement and strengthening democratic values in India.

IMPACT OF DR. BABASAHEB AMBEDKAR'S CONVERSION TO BUDDHISM

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar wanted to correct the wrongs in the Hindu social order. He wanted to liberate the untouchables from the clutches of Hindu social order. He attempted to reform the Hindu social order from within; he endeavored to appeal the conscience of the so-called Hindu leaders for the same. However, his efforts were in vain. On the contrary, he had to face the wrath of the orthodox Hindus.

Thus, left with no alternative, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar decided to convert to other religion, a religion which would be truly based on the democratic principles of liberty, equality, fraternity and social justice. He believed that it was only the Buddha's Dhamma i.e. Buddhism which was the most suitable religion for his conversion.³ Accordingly, on 14th Oct Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar with his followers embraced Buddhism. He decided to revive Buddhism in India, the land of its origin. To him to strengthen democracy in India and to restructure the Hindu society on the democratic principles the revival and spread of Buddhist in India was necessary.

Social Transformation :-

The Hindu society was based on the principle of graded inequality. The four Varna and thousands of castes and sub-castes were graded one above another with contempt for those below one's Varna or caste and respect and fear of those above one's Varna and Caste. The untouchability was the worst form of this contempt. The touch and even the shadow of the Untouchables polluted the upper castes. The pollution caused by the Untouchables was so powerful that even the Gods were polluted by their touch and entry into the temples. Dr. Ambedkar tirelessly worked for the reform in the Hindu social order. He wanted to restructure the age-long social order based on the democratic principles of liberty, equality, fraternity and social justice. And when he learnt that this reform or reconstruction of Hindu society was impossible from within he turned to Buddhism. He renounced Hinduism and embraced Buddhism and appealed his millions of followers to convert to Buddhism with a hope to provide a model society based of equality, fraternity and social justice and free of inequality, injustice, contempt, pollution ignominies etc. He wanted to use Buddhism as an antidote to Hinduism.

On his appeal, on 14th October 1956 nearly half a million of his followers converted to Buddhism. After this historic event Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar passed away only in 52 days. However it did not hinder the conversion movement.

This wave of mass conversion to Buddhism by the untouchables freed them from the age-long slavery under the Hindu fold. The untouchables were now free human beings. They were no more dehumanized and demoralized. Their lost confidence for generations was now reinstated. They understood and respected the principles of liberty, equality, fraternity and social justice. They believed in the democratic form of social order. They started believing in the associated form of living. They among themselves started abolishing their caste and sub-caste identities and considered themselves as a class. They called themselves as Buddhists, Dalits, scheduled castes etc. to show their oneness. This was a great social transformation. The rigid Hindu social order has started becoming flexible to retain the scheduled castes and the *Shudra* castes within its fold. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism has had a great impact on the orthodox and casteist psyche of the caste Hindus. Though the caste still remains, the age-long atrocities, discriminate treatment, ignominies have started abating. Temples are now thrown open for the scheduled castes. Public places like gardens, roads are open to their use. Schools, hospitals, hotels are equally accessed by the Scheduled Castes. There is no observation of untouchability at all apparently.

Building the separate identity of untouchable as Buddhist :

The Untouchables were out-caste. They were *Avarnas* i.e. out of the Varnasystem.¹⁰ They had no place in the Caste system as well as in the four Varna system i.e. *Chaturvarnya*. Though they were not included in the Hindu social structure, they happened to be a part of Hindu society and considered as collective property of the caste Hindus. They had no social status as their own; they had no human existence as such; they had no respectable identity. Their identity was that of a slave. They were worse than the slaves in the Africa and Europe. They were worse than animals. Their identity as human being had lost for ages. Dr. Ambedkar believed that to establish the untouchables as normal human beings, as respectable members of society and privileged citizens of polity they have to abolish their identity as Untouchable. And, for that their conversion to such a religion which could provide them with new and respectable identity was inevitable.¹⁵ And, after intensive and extensive study of almost all the major religions of the world Dr. Ambedkar found that the Buddha's Dhamma would be the best religion for the untouchable for that purpose.

Dr. Babasaheb not only gave the untouchables their own lost identity but connected them with the long and glorious history of their own. He also entrusted them with the mission of revival of Buddhism in India and bringing all the Scheduled Castes, Other Backward Classes(OBC) or the *Shudras* in the new but revived fold of Buddhism which was their original identity and which was their own culture and religion.

The untouchables, especially the Mahar Community of Maharashtra embraced Buddhism and reassumed their original identity as Buddhist as per taught by their leader Dr. Ambedkar. They also set out to propagate Buddhism in India with a view to preserving and strengthening the democratic principles of liberty, equality, fraternity and social justice in India.

The Buddhist Society of India founded by Dr. Ambedkar for the **sole objective of propagation of Buddhism and Buddhist culture** among the Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes is working with devotion.¹⁹ There are many other such organizations that are working for the same cause of giving the scheduled castes their original identity.

Change in the psychology of the Scheduled Castes :-

The Scheduled castes or the untouchables were demoralized and dehumanized for ages. They were deprived of their existence as human beings. They were reduced to the existence as beasts, in fact worse than beasts.

Ignorance, illiteracy, lack of self-respect and confidence, poverty, helplessness, servitude etc. was their fate. And, this sub-human existence had been accepted by them as their destiny. They were not in a position to rebel. Their mental state was like that of a slave. They had been in deep slumber for ages. However, the social reformers like Mahatma Phoolley started awakening and educating them. He started the first school in India for untouchables in Poona in 1848.

His follower Gopal Baba Walangkar was the first untouchable who strove to awaken his brothers. The prince Shri Sayajirao Gaekwad of Baroda started schools for the untouchables in 1883. The culmination of Dr. Ambedkar's movement for the liberation and emancipation of the untouchables was the conversion to Buddhism. The conversion of Dr. Babasaheb to Buddhism with his millions of followers had a great and everlasting impact on the psychology of the earlier untouchable and present day Scheduled Castes.

Revival of Buddhism in Modern India :-

The conversion of Dr. Babasaheb and his followers to Buddhism on 14th oct.1956 at Nagpur was undoubtedly an epoch-making event in the religious history of India in general and history of Buddhism in particular. It has changed the course of the history of Buddhism. On this historic day of 14th oct 1956 the revival of Buddhism in India took a plunge and entered an era of intense activity which can rightly be called the 'Ambedkar-Era' of Indian Buddhism.

The movement for revival of Buddhism in India began in May 1891 with the formation of Maha Bodhi Society by Anagarika Dharmapala, a young Sinhala Buddhist. He was the first great Buddhist missionary of modern times. By 1956, The Maha Bodhi Society and other pioneers devoted to the Buddhist mission in India, created a great deal of awareness about the rich heritage of Buddhism but could not attract many followers towards Buddhism. Then, the impact of this revival movement by 1956 was not much.

It was Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and his people who embraced Buddhism in 1956 and boosted up the Buddhist revival movement. It was unprecedented in the history of any religion, that such a huge number of people at one time, and at the instances of our single man converted to a particular religion. Even after the untimely demise of Dr. Ambedkar the conversion movement continued unabated.

Rise in population of Buddhists in India :-

Through the Buddhist revival movement began in India in May 1891 with the founding of the Mahabodhi Society in Calcutta, the real impetus to this movement received from the man concession of Dr. Ambedkar and his followers in 1956. The Mahabodhi Society and its pioneers could not convert many adherents to Buddhism. In 1891 the population of Buddhist in India was 50,000 and even after sixty years in 1951, the Buddhist population rose only to 1,80,823.

Almost 90% of this population was the traditional Buddhist from Assam, west Bengal and the high Himalayan Valley. However, the conversion of Dr. Ambedkar to Buddhism with his half a million followers and the wave of conversion thereafter increased the Buddhist population unprecedentedly. The census of 1961 showed a miraculous increase of over 3 million in the Buddhist population in India. It rose from 1,80,823, in 1951 to 32,50,227, in 1961. The percentage of in this increase was 1670.717 and that to within a short span of five years, from 1956 to 1961. In the state of Maharashtra the increase was maximum. In 1951 there was only 2,487 Buddhist in Maharashtra, and in 1961 this number rose spectacularly to 27,89,501. This increase surprised the jains in Maharashtra as well as in India in one stroke.

Evolution of Neo-Buddhist Literature :-

The Buddha's teachings and doctrine had been scattered in the vast ocean of literature known as 'Tripitaka'. Buddhist monks and nuns i.e. Bhikkus and Bhikkunis spent their entire life reading these literatures.

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar wanted a single and lucid book for the understanding of Buddha's teaching. He wanted to have a Bible of Buddhism. Because if when his followers wanted to learn and read about the teachings of the Buddha and his Dhamma they would get confused and lost in the vast ocean of literature of Buddhism, it was not a task of a common man to go through such a vast literature. Therefore Dr. Ambedkar wanted to write a Buddhist Bible for his people.

Moreover, Ambedkar's conception of Buddhism was neither Hinayana nor Mahayana. He had totally different understanding of Buddhism. Dr. Ambedkar's approach to Buddhism was social and ethical rather than philosophical and mystical. According to him Religion is personal and one must keep it oneself. On the other hand Buddha's Dhamma is social it is fundamentally and essentially so.

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar did not embrace Hinayana or Mahayana. He himself said to have embraced a **Navyana** or Neo-Buddhism. Hence, his '**The Buddha and his Dhamma**' also reflects his neo-Buddhist conception of Buddhism. K. David Pandya has rightly called a Neo-Buddhist religion text. He writes, "The Buddha and His Dhamma" can be treated as the religion text of Neo-Buddhism and in it are the Doctrinal tenets. This compendium has assimilated substance of the Buddhist literature devoid of any supernatural or tantric or Yogic experiences. Such a text should be acclaimed as an universal authority on Buddhism." This book brought about a revolutionary change in the mind-set, belief system and outlook of the Neo-Buddhists towards the world. It cultivated a rational and scientific outlook in them. They started looking at the problems of the world and those of their own from a different practical and realistic perspective. The democratic principles of liberty, equality, fraternity and social justice were strongly upheld by them. They started expressing their rational, scientific, democratic thought through literatures. For them Buddhism was not a religion but an instrument of social change. It is a formula for reconstruction of society. They believed that the principles of Buddhism were democratic and therefore Buddhism was conducive to and supportive to nation building.

Development of International relations with Buddhist Countries :-

The conversion of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and his people to Buddhism had a great impact on the international relationship of India to the Buddhist countries.

The relationship has started developing in a friendly way.

The cognizance of this historic and phenomenal conversion was taken by almost all the major Buddhist countries of the world. Dr. Babasaheb before and after his conversion attended world Buddhist conference in Ceylon, Myanmar and Nepal respectively in the years 1950, 1954 and 1956 and appealed to the Buddhist world to make India at the center of their Buddhist missionary activities for the revival of Buddhism in its native land. The neo-Buddhist followers of Dr. Ambedkar have also established their own Buddha Vihara throughout India. They have founded organizations, and institutes for the education, and propagation of the teachings of Buddhism and Buddhist way of life. They have developed contacts with Buddhist nations and the Buddhist organization there through various programs.

This development gave rise to the tourism in the land of Buddha. Foreign Buddhist people started visiting India to see and study the native land of Buddha. They come to India to learn the art of Buddhist meditation. They even started conducting research and writing books on the Buddha, Buddhist culture, Buddhist history, Buddhist caves etc. in India.

Thus, the conversion Dr. Babasaheb had a great impact in terms of development of international relations with Buddhist countries.

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar embraced Buddhism with a difficult objective in mind. He wanted to liberate the untouchable from the clutches of the Hindu social order and the Hindus. He wanted to restructure the Indian society and the democratic principal of liberty, equality, fraternity and social justices. He wanted to give the untouchables an identity of their own as identity self-respect and this concern had that effect abort transformation in the social order it gave the untouchable a different identity as Buddhist. It changed the position of the untouchable and developed a sense of self-respect. Thus, the impact Dr. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism and impact of his conversion is said to be the liberation of the untouchables from the Hindu social order.

EPILOGUE

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism is one of the landmark incidents in the religious history of India. His conversion to Buddhism is one of the greatest blow to Hinduism in India. His conversion did not only deny the Hindu religion but also discarded the Hindu social norms. He had the courage to fight against the contemporary social system. For thousands of years tyranny of Hinduism was tolerated by the depressed classes. Hindu traditions customs norms were so rigid and cruel because of which there was no constructive revolt against Hinduism. Minds of depressed classes were dominated by Hindu religious scriptures and they accepted slavery as their fate. According to Babasaheb Ambedkar, associated living was necessary for any democratic society. His observation was that for thousands of years Hinduism propagated graded discriminatory social system which was against the principles of healthy democratic society. He also observed that the minds of depressed classes became victim of social psyche and they accepted slavery as their fate. Babasaheb Ambedkar gave importance to the freedom of human mind.

It was Babasaheb Ambedkar who took up the mission of reviving Buddhism in Modern India. He wrote articles, books and raised awareness amongst Indians about Buddhism. He put forth Broken Men theory. He described that Ancient Indian History was a conflict between Buddhist and Brahmanical ideology. He emphatically put forth the fact that India was once a Buddhist country. He traced the causes of decline of Buddhism in India. He exposed the Pushya Mitra Shunga, the Brahmin Hindu ruler, who played a major role to destroy Buddhism. Babasaheb Ambedkar's speeches also were inspiring for conversion to Buddhism of depressed classes. His declaration of renouncing Hinduism in 1935 had great impact on entire India because Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was not only a single person but he was a leader of seven crore Untouchables in India. Some of the Hindus threatened him that he will be killed by them but Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar remained firm and determinant about his decision of leaving Hindu fold. Finally in October 1956 Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar along with his lakhs of followers embraced Buddhism with a strong belief and faith in democratic ideology of Buddhism and noble intention of reviving Buddhism in India.

The mission of Jyotiba was taken up by Dr. Ambedkar. He regarded him as one of his three preceptors, the other two being - the Buddha and Saint Kabir. He followed the path of his preceptors, gurus. He challenged the hegemony of the Brahmanic religious literatures or Shastras. He attempted to prove and expose the futility and nonsense of the Shastras. He shouldered the responsibility to liberate the depressed and suppressed masses by treading on the path of his preceptors like a true disciple. He made the liberation of the Untouchables in particular and that of the Shudras in general a mission of his life.

For this liberation of the depressed masses the reconstruction of the Hindu society on the democratic principles of liberty, equality, fraternity and justice was necessary. And for this reconstruction of society, the destruction of the religion based on the Shastras or on the oppressive Rules must be destroyed. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar strenuously attempted to bring about this destruction from within the fold, but in vain. Seeing the apathetical attitudes of the Hindu leaders and the slumber of the Hindu masses he decided to revive the indigenous potent force of Buddhism, the sharp proven weapon to kill the monster of Brahmanism and its progeny, namely Chaturvarnya, Castes and Untouchability. And, in due course of time he successfully revived Buddhism in India in its true sense.

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