

B. R. AMBEDKAR AND THE NEO-BUDDHIST MOVEMENT IN INDIA

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Although Buddhism arose in India and is everywhere permeated with Indian elements, it died out in its homeland sometime after the first millennium A.D. With few exceptions, it did not reappear again in India until the late nineteenth century. Among the several Indian Buddhist movements of this century, the strongest and most widespread is that begun by Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar ¹⁾, with his public declaration of faith in 1956. His Neo-Buddhism, conceived as a social movement for the elevation of India's depressed, is propagated today largely among Untouchables. ²⁾

Bhimrao Ramji was born in the village of Ambavade in the Ratnagiri District in Maharashtra on April 14, 1891. ³⁾ His father, Ramji Sakpal, and his grandfather, Maloji Sakpal, belonged to the group of Untouchables known as Mahars. Mahars constitute about 10% of the population of Maharashtra and must maintain streets, walls, and cremation grounds, carry messages, and haul away dead cattle, but do not have to clean latrines or night soil. ⁴⁾ Both of his parents followed the Hindu movement started by Kabir (fifteenth century), a Bhakti group denying the rigidity of the caste system on the grounds that anyone who worshipped God belonged to God regardless of birth. The last of fourteen children, Bhimrao was raised by his aunt after his mother died in 1898. His father taught him when he was young and then sent him away to school, where he found he was forbidden to learn Sanskrit. In high school, he met a Brahman teacher named Ambedkar who grew fond of him, and

changed his name from Ambavadekar (taken from the ancestral village) to Ambedkar.

Ambedkar received his B.A. from Elphinstone College, and after his father died in early 1913, left for Columbia University, New York, with money given by the Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad of Baroda, for whom he had worked and who offered to give money to Untouchables for their education. In 1915 he received an M.A. from Columbia for his thesis "Ancient Indian Commerce", and in 1916 a Ph.D. for his "National Dividend of India", later published as "The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India". He moved to London in the same year for further study, but was recalled to India in 1917 for lack of funds to serve as Military Secretary to Gaekwad. Ill-treated as a Mahar, he returned to Bombay, and in 1918 became an Economics professor at Sydenham College. Although he was well-liked, he still confronted the problems of untouchability and began to enter actively into caste issues. In 1920 he returned to London to continue his education, and received an M.Sc. in 1921 for his "Provincial Decentralization of Imperial Finance in British India" and a D.Sc. in 1923 for his "The Problem of the Rupee", later published under the same title. Called to the bar in 1922, he then returned to India and began law practice in June 1923.

In the 1920's, Ambedkar began work for the Untouchables. An early incident reflects the problems he faced and his consistent response to them. In 1923 and again in 1926, the Mahad Municipality opened the Chowdar Tank to the Untouchables, but they had not yet exercised their rights because of caste Hindu hostility. As a result in March 1927, Ambedkar organized a conference at Mahad and a march on the Tank. The rally was filled with speeches af-

firming self-respect, self-help, and self-elevation for non-caste Hindus. At the end of the conference zealous members, led by Ambedkar, marched to the well and drank from it. The caste Hindus, now roused, became belligerent and attacked. Many were hurt, but the Untouchables departed in order. In August of that year, the Municipality revoked its resolution opening the well to everyone, and in December Ambedkar called another conference at Mahad. The Untouchables again tried to use Chowdas Tank, this time without incident. Ambedkar spoke, as was his custom, on the reorganization of Hindu society along lines of equality and absence of casteism, and as a symbol of revolt condemned the Manusmriti and threw it in the fire. The conference closed peacefully, however, and the visible Mahad struggle ended as a great impetus to the Untouchable movement. The battle against the caste Hindus continued in a ten year court suit which the Untouchables finally won in March 1937. This was one of their first acts of assertion, which was to gain momentum as Ambedkar turned more and more to political and social reform in the 1930's.

During this period Ambedkar successfully founded a series of newspapers in order to press for social reform, and was active as a conference speaker and as a labor leader during strikes. In 1929 the British government decided to hold a series of three Round Table Conferences to discuss the problem of a new constitution and a new system of government for India. Because Ambedkar was nominated as representative of the Untouchables, M.K. Gandhi, who considered himself spiritual leader to India's outcaste Hindus, boycotted the first conference in 1930 but attended the second in 1931. It was at this time that the famous Gandhi/Ambedkar feud over the proper course of action for

Untouchables began. Although the caste issue remained undecided at the conference, Ambedkar found great sympathy in England for the Untouchable movement, and as its leader, was well received.⁵⁾ His feud with Gandhi grew over the issue of who was the real representative of the Untouchables, but telegrams wired to London from Untouchable communities in India overwhelmingly affirmed Ambedkar. The undercurrent of Untouchable opinion had always favored his views and their continued political awareness was due to his influence.⁶⁾

In August 1932, the British announced their decision on the caste matter in the Communal Award, giving the Untouchables a reserved number of seats, assigned to them for a period of twenty years. This was a victory for Ambedkar, but Gandhi rejected the Award and began a fast unto death. Ambedkar thought the fast political blackmail⁷⁾, but to prevent Gandhi from starving to death, in September 1932 signed what was to be known as the Poona Pact. Through the Poona Pact separate electorates for Untouchables were given up and the seats reserved for them were to be elected by all castes in the general election. Although the Pact meant more seats for the Untouchables and access for them to temples and wells, Ambedkar viewed the Pact as a betrayal by Gandhi of the case for real social reform.⁸⁾

In 1936 in opposition to the Congress Party, Ambedkar founded the Independent Labor Party to meet the needs and grievances of the landless, the poor, and the dispossessed. In 1938, he was elected to the Bombay Legislative Assembly along with other members of his new party, and in 1942 founded the Scheduled Castes Federation. In 1945 he established the People's Education Society in Bombay and its Siddharth College in 1946; and in 1947 he became the first

Minister of Law of independent India, the first executive position ever to be filled by an Untouchable. In the same year, he became a member of the Flag Committee of the Constituent Assembly which adopted the Ashokachakra tricolor flag. He was then elected chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee and due to the absence of most other members during working sessions, he wrote much of the Constitution himself and included in it wide-ranging social reforms. Because of his efforts, he became known as the Constitution's chief architect, the "Father of the Indian Constitution", a "Modern Manu".

After the adoption of the Constitution on November 26, 1949, Ambedkar turned his attention to the Hindu Code Bill, aimed at modifying, standardizing, and codifying much of Hindu law. Among other things, the Bill introduced four new provisions: abolition of "right by birth", the right of women over their own property, a share of inheritance to the daughter, and provisions for divorce.⁹⁾ The battle over the Bill was bitter and much of it was defeated, including the sections on marriage and divorce. Ambedkar had alienated many people with his arguments, and in 1951 resigned his cabinet post. The Bill, however, was later greatly modified and passed.

The last few years of Ambedkar's life were devoted to the revival of Buddhism in India. On October 14, 1956 in Nagpur, Ambedkar participated in a rite publically affirming his choice of Buddhism and the incorporation of the Untouchables present into the Buddhist fold. This rite, presided over by the Venerable Chandramani Mahathera of Kushinagar, is often referred to as his "official conversion". On December 6, 1956 in Delhi he died in his sleep.

Ambedkar's Critique of Caste, Hinduism and Religion

Within the framework of the events of his life, Ambedkar drew up elaborate theories for the origin and function of caste, Hinduism and religion. His ideology describes the original social structure as a division of labor based solely upon skill. This structure gradually became a rigid caste system which promoted the rights of birth, and fostered an anti-social spirit incompatible with common activity among men:

Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible... The capacity to appreciate merits in a man apart from his caste does not exist in a Hindu.¹⁰⁾

Caste is intrinsically involved in the way men live and in the quality of their lives. It is a notion, a state of mind, whose destruction is necessary for the breakdown of all barriers between men.¹¹⁾ Implicit in the notion of caste structure is that there be people outside of it:

The outcaste is a by-product of the caste system. There will be outcastes as long as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of the caste system.¹²⁾

The outcaste is not only part of the whole caste system, but is that which supports the rest of the structure. In an Agra address, Ambedkar posed this metaphor: Hindu society is like a wall with layers; the Untouchables are the bottom layer and if the bottom bricks are taken out, the wall falls down.¹³⁾

In speaking of caste Ambedkar deals most specifically with the problem of Untouchability. In his "The Untouchables", he outlines his thesis of their origin. Just as Untouchables are now "avarna", that is outside the system

of caste, so also were they outside the system originally. Very early there was a tribal society with settled people and nomads. The settled people hired the nomads, or as Ambedkar calls them the "Broken Men", to protect the villages. These men, "broken" because they had become dissociated from their own tribes, lived as stray individuals on the outskirts of town, and in return for their services of protection, the settlers gave them food and shelter. The Broken Men were not only the forerunners of today's Untouchables, the "Antyajias" who live on the outskirts of the city, but were also the original Buddhists. In time it became known that the Broken Men would not kill cows (though they would eat beef), and their reputation of virtue brought them many converts. The Brahmans became jealous and proclaimed the more stringent rule of neither killing nor eating beef. In addition, the Brahmans established worship of the cow, thus enticing many of the converts back into their own fold. The notion of untouchability thus arose from the contempt of the Brahmans for the Broken Men/Buddhists based upon their continual beef-eating in the face of Brahman vegetarianism. Because they ate beef they came to be considered impure and highly polluting.¹⁴⁾

In his struggle for social rights for the Untouchables, Ambedkar worked for two specific issues of reform: temple entry for Untouchables and abolition of "priestcraft". He often argues for the right of an Untouchable to be able to enter any Hindu temple to worship, holding

...that the image of God in the temple should be accessible to all who wanted to worship it...(and)... that a temple is not defiled by the presence of an Untouchable, nor is the purity of the image affected by it.¹⁵⁾

He finds it unbelievable that although Untouchables

are considered Hindus with Hindu beliefs, they are not allowed to enter temples to worship Hindu deities. The name "Hindu", when given to Untouchables, should concomitantly imply Hindu rights and privileges.

Ambedkar also calls for the abolition of the priesthood. His denunciation of "priestcraft" argues that untouchability is a religious as well as an economic system: the Brahman priest places himself above the outcaste in both spheres ¹⁶⁾, and oppresses him to suffocation. In speaking out against the traditional sanctity of the temple and the priesthood, Ambedkar recognizes his iconoclasm - "I am no worshipper of Idols. I believe in breaking them". ¹⁷⁾

When asked about the remedy to the caste system in Hindu society, Ambedkar replies: total reorganization of the society. Hindu society should be reformed and reconstructed so that it is liberated from casteism and "priestcraft". Frequently using the slogan borrowed from the French Revolution, "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity", Ambedkar notes that "...unless you change your social order you can achieve little by way of progress". ¹⁸⁾ He calls for a complete change in the village system and destruction of the belief in the sanctity of the law books (Shastras), undermining their ability to mold belief and behavior. ¹⁹⁾ Remodeled Hindu society would be characterized by one book of Hindu religion acceptable to all Hindus, priests' accession to office based on passing a state exam, and priests limited in number by law and subject to disciplinary action by the state. ²⁰⁾ Reform, however, occurs fundamentally through change in attitude, and in accordance with his self-help injunctions, Ambedkar urges the change of attitude to begin with the Untouchables themselves.

For most of his life Ambedkar believed that social reform must take precedence over political and economic reform. This was to occur in two spheres: in the Hindu family, where there should be reform in widow remarriage and child marriage laws; and in Hindu society, where there should be reform of the entire caste system.²¹⁾ Later in his life, however, he felt that social reform was no longer an attainable goal, and declared that social emancipation and political aspiration must be secondary to religious reform, because religion, he felt, lay at the basis of social structure.

How is the reformation of Hindu society and the abolition of caste to come about: For Ambedkar there are three alternatives: 1.) abolishing all subcastes; 2.) inter-caste dining; and 3.) inter-caste marriage. The first two are not acceptable because they are inadequate. Only the third, inter-caste marriage, is satisfactory because the consequent mixture of blood would result in the breakdown of biological caste barriers.²²⁾ Inter-caste marriage also destroys the sanctity of the Shastras and thereby opens the way for general equality.

An important element in Ambedkar's view of caste and its abolition is his disagreement with Gandhi over the method of treating Untouchables in politics. Much has been written about their feud, focusing upon four main issues: caste, the Untouchable, elections, and Home Rule (Swaraj). Gandhi himself is of the Bania (merchant and moneylending) caste, a group considered parasitic by Ambedkar²³⁾, and his attitude toward caste is emphatic. Gandhi believes the caste system is beneficial and that it is a structure necessary to Hindu society. It represents an ideal social system with its built-in mechanisms for the spread of primary

education and for the promotion of Swaraj. Ambedkar, on the other hand, completely rejects caste as the source of all social evils he sees in Hindu society. On Gandhi he says, "He stands for the cursed caste (system). He is a fanatic Hindu upholding the Hindu religion".²⁴⁾

The issue of untouchability is no less problematic. Because he believes in the caste system, Gandhi wants to raise the social position of the Untouchables and grant them the status of a fifth caste, thus removing their stigma of untouchability. (Although the removal of untouchability was an important plank of Congress propaganda, Ambedkar notes that Gandhi refused to spend much money on it.)²⁵⁾ Believing himself their natural guardian, Gandhi fights against the political separation of the Untouchables from the Hindu community and urges their complete "Sanskritization". He feels it is only necessary for the caste Hindus to have an opportunity to expiate their sins and purify Hinduism; when such a reformation does occur the Untouchables will gain a place in regular society.²⁶⁾ Separation of the Untouchables would cause a division in Hinduism highly damaging to Indian culture. Ambedkar, on the other hand, feels that separation is the only feasible way to attain political and social rights for non-caste Hindus. The Untouchables refuse to be a fifth caste because they do not want equation with Shudras, a caste labelled "Hindu", but lacking all associated rights. By retaining the caste system while removing Untouchables, the government would simply make room for a new group of out-castes to form. A resolution passed by the All India Depressed Classes Conference in 1942 incorporated the Untouchable refusal to accept a Constitution unless "it recognizes the fact that Scheduled Castes are distinct and

separate from the Hindus and constitute an important element in the national life of India".²⁷⁾

The issue of elections is closely bound to that of untouchability. While Gandhi wants one electorate for all castes, Ambedkar wants separate electorates so that the Untouchables will have the power to legislate their own rights. For Gandhi a separate electorate leads to fragmentation of the nation, but Ambedkar believes that there is no real reform with the oppressive caste system in existence.²⁸⁾

On the final issue of Home Rule, Gandhi, as head of the Indian Swaraj movement, believes that political independence from Britain must come before all social reform. Ambedkar, on the other hand, argues that political independence is useless unless the country is ready for it. A country is only ready when its social system is viably functioning, and "without such internal strength, swaraj for Hindus may turn out to be only a step towards slavery".²⁹⁾ When the British leave, vacating government posts, middle class Hindus will move in to occupy their places, leaving the social structure and consequent suppression of the Untouchable exactly the same. In other words, "Swaraj" would become "Hinduraj".³⁰⁾ In his attack on Gandhi, Ambedkar often shows the Mahatma speaking favorably of Untouchable aid in the early days, but never acting upon his word, for "Gandhi's country-wide demonstrations of friendliness with the Depressed Classes were more spectacular than real".³¹⁾

Ambedkar's struggle with and attack upon Gandhi left him hated by many who favored the Mahatma.³²⁾ Because of this he continually questioned his role as real representative of the Untouchable movement.³³⁾ There can be no doubt

in retrospect, however, that he was the symbol of Untouchable hope for a better life in the future.

Turning to Ambedkar's views on Hinduism, it is apparent that in spite of the criticism he levels against the existing social structure, Ambedkar works from a deep faith in the spiritual values and cultural heritage of India. His love of country, however, is not blind. He sees Hinduism as disruptive of social unity and as "a riddle of the contradictions between dignified thoughts and base behavior".³⁴⁾ Among the evils of Hinduism, Ambedkar included deprivation of freedom and spontaneity arising from conformity to externally imposed values, obedience to commands rather than loyalty to ideas, and laws unequally applicable among peoples and invested with finality and fixity.³⁵⁾ Hinduism, or Brahmanism, has become an instrument of oppression in the hands of the upper class used to suppress the masses.

Are Untouchables part of the Hindu system? Ambedkar's response is ambiguous. When asked in 1928 whether Untouchables are real Hindus he says,

I do not care for the nomenclature. It does not matter whether I call myself a Hindu or a non-Hindu as long as I am outside the pale of Hinduism.

If Untouchables are outside the pale of Hinduism are they still governed by Hindu law? "We are governed by Hindu Law".³⁶⁾ In later years, however, it was acknowledged that Untouchables believe they are not Hindus, while the Congress Party believes they are. Although Ambedkar longs for his group to be an integral part of the Indian system, he will not participate in it at the expense of political power and social rights.

In the matter of religion, Ambedkar distinguishes a

false religion of rules from a true one of principles. In a religion of rules like Hinduism, acts are mechanical, whereas in a religion of principles like Buddhism, acts are consciously done. Early in his career Ambedkar believed that a religion of principles could be founded upon the Upanishads but he later concluded that Buddhism, with its lack of caste, was the only religion of principles possible in India.

At the Untouchables' Youth Conference in Bombay in 1936, Ambedkar describes the function of a true religion as the uplift of the individual. Religion must serve the purposes of man.

I tell you, religion is for man and not man for religion. If you want to organize, consolidate and to be successful in this world, change this (Hindu) religion.³⁷⁾

True religion gives an individual self-respect, freedom, and equal opportunity in this world rather than hope for the next. It provides man with a strong character because it contains social and moral ethics which mold character and develop personality, and which bring man into a closer relationship with God and his fellowmen. Religion is for the enlightenment of people and must be universally applicable to all men.

Religion and society are intricately bound. "I consider the foundations of religion to be essential to life and practices of society".³⁸⁾ Because religion is paramount to the social order, there should be no antagonism between religion and the state. The state must respect all religions, and not coerce its people to follow any one in particular. It has the right, however, to interfere in religion if it is violating personal laws in the community. The state should be neither indifferent nor coercive to-

wards religion; it should not interfere with a peoples' religious freedom but it should ensure their rights at all times.³⁹⁾

Ambedkar's Buddhism

Ambedkar's religious and social ideology shapes the rationale for his adoption of Buddhism. His conversion is the climax of a thread of personal experiences and his life story vis à vis Buddhism is a matter of myth as well as history. Because so many writers, including Westerners, impute prophetic and teleological motivations to the "Buddhist events" in Ambedkar's life and see in them more than is actually there, objective accounts of his early encounters with Buddhism are very rare. The personal history of Ambedkar, however, as is known and venerated by his followers, the Buddhist Ambedkarites, is important to the growth of his movement.

Birth stories are a popular form of mythology. According to legend, a prophecy before his birth foretold Ambedkar's greatness. A Sannyasi, the uncle of his father Ramji Sakpal, came to his father's house, and in return for hospitality gave the boon of a famous son. Ambedkar was born April 14, 1891 A.D. - just over 2500 years after the Buddha's birth, April 14, 623 B.C., according to some "scholar" calculations.⁴⁰⁾ (The Buddha Jayanti in 1956-57, celebrating 2500 years of Buddhism heightened the anticipation for a new Buddhist leader, thus confirming Ambedkar in this role.) Ambedkar's prophetic birthday and his astrological charts were said to favor a Buddhist development, and many see an inclination toward Buddhism from childhood.⁴¹⁾ Early parallels are drawn between Ambedkar and the Buddha: the pre-birth prophecy, the date of birth, and the

death of Ambedkar's mother when he was seven years old (the Buddha's mother died when he was seven days old).

Later events are more likely to be historical. When Ambedkar passed the entrance exams to college in 1907, one of the officials, K.A. Keluskar, gave him a copy of his own "Life of Gautama Buddha".⁴²⁾ In 1927 at the conclusion of the Mahad (Chowdar Tank) Conference, Ambedkar and his party went to see the excavations in the neighborhood said to have dated from the Buddha's time.⁴³⁾ Ambedkar recounted stories of the Buddha's disciples who had remained celibate, embraced poverty and served society selflessly.⁴⁴⁾ (The party then proceeded to sacred Hindu sites, and Ambedkar spoke similar words of respect.) In the 1920's Ambedkar corresponded with Maharshi Shinde, a Maratha reformer, about Shinde's interest in Buddhism.⁴⁵⁾ At the Jalgaon Conference in May 1929 a resolution was passed for Untouchables to embrace any other religion but Hinduism. In 1933 Ambedkar wrote a friend, Subhedar Savadkar, and told him he was thinking of conversion, at the moment to Buddhism, but that he had not yet decided.⁴⁶⁾ The next year Ambedkar built a house in the Brahman colony in Bombay and named it Rajagriha⁴⁷⁾, after the town where the first Buddhist Council was held.

At the Yeola Conference in 1935, Ambedkar told orthodox Hindus he would not die a Hindu. Instead he and his followers would soon convert, probably in five years, to some yet unnamed religion. Ambedkar legends hold that from this time on he was secretly a Buddhist, a "Dharmaduta" par excellence.⁴⁸⁾ With his announcement to convert, Ambedkar was flooded with invitations from different religions. The Maha Bodhi Society of Benares invited him to embrace Buddhism, and similar offers came from the Sikhs,

Jains, Muslims, and Christians, all affirming their belief in social equality.⁴⁹⁾ As the religious leaders continued to court Ambedkar, the Hindu leaders became frightened of losing the masses of Untouchables.⁵⁰⁾ They realized he was using conversion as a political threat, and offered to make some concessions. Ambedkar at that time was still willing to accept any Hindu offer that met his demands.

In April 1936 he addressed the Sikhs, approving their stand on social equality. Sikhism was attractive because converting Untouchables could remain in the Hindu culture without being denationalized. In September of that year Ambedkar sent some followers to a Sikh Mission in Amritsar to study the Sikh religion. When asked in 1937 why he would not establish his own religion, Ambedkar replied, "I am a Mahar and not a Shankaracharya. Who will follow the religion established by a Mahar?"⁵¹⁾ Legendmakers say that the shadow of Buddhism still lurked over him as it had throughout his childhood⁵²⁾, and in 1946 the first of the colleges established by his People's Education Society was one called Siddharth.⁵³⁾ In May 1950 Ambedkar addressed the Young Men's Buddhist Association in Colombo and spoke of the reasons for Buddhism's downfall in India. He then addressed a meeting in Colombo's town hall and asked the Untouchables to embrace Buddhism, calling upon the Ceylonese Buddhists to accept the Untouchables in their communities. In July 1950 he spoke to the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, denying any opportunistic motives in converting to Buddhism, and affirming a lifelong spiritual interest in the religion. In September of that year, Ambedkar addressed the Buddhist Temple at Worli near Bombay and urged people to embrace Buddhism to end their hardships. He vowed to devote the rest of his life to the revival and

spread of Buddhism in India.⁵⁴⁾ On the occasion of the Buddha Jayanti Celebration in New Delhi in May 1951, Ambedkar criticized Hinduism saying that the "real salvation for India is in Buddhism". In February 1953, he again called upon people to join Buddhism.⁵⁵⁾

On the BBC in London in May 1956, Ambedkar preferred 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)...⁵⁶⁾ Neither god nor soul can save the society.

In the same month Ambedkar announced that he would publically embrace Buddhism in October and this he did on the fourteenth in a morning ceremony in Nagpur. This town was chosen because its ancient peoples propagated Buddhism in India and were enemies of the Brahmanizing Aryans.⁵⁷⁾

Ambedkar's symbolic "diksha" (consecration) was unprecedented in the history of India, and was motivated both by personal conviction and by a desire to open a viable way for Untouchable progress before his death. Theoretically, Ambedkar viewed conversion as an individual as well as a social act, as an act imperative for spiritual as well as worldly ends. It entailed a rational reassessment of those human values most useful to man's immediate needs and intellectual curiosity. Conversion, he thought, was justified only when man's physical, social and spiritual ends could better be served in another religion. As a notion, conversion is entirely antithetical to the spirit of Hinduism, for it amounts to conversion from caste. But since he feels that caste destroys economic competition, social morale and public spirit, Ambedkar converts to give his

people freedom. Put off for many years, conversion becomes the last hope, social or religious. He chooses Buddhism, a religion highly amenable to conversion, for several reasons: Untouchables are originally Buddhist ("Broken Men"), Buddhism is an Indian religion and therefore nearer to the people than Islam or Christianity, Buddhism can withstand the severest scientific test and has the power to direct the destinies of the modern world, and conversion paves the way for world brotherhood throughout the Buddhist community.⁵⁸⁾

Ambedkar chooses Buddhism because it is innately ethical.⁵⁹⁾ Buddhism itself arose as a revolt against "parasitic luxury", a revolt which later prepared the foundation for a "prosperous and glorious civilization".⁶⁰⁾ For the first time in India's history the Buddha examined the social laws of Hindu society and rejected its theory of Chaturvarnya (four castes). In his sympathy for the common people, the Buddha created a religious society in which all men were equal and caste was non-existent. Itself originally a reformist movement within Hindu society, Buddhism became the model religion for Ambedkar's conversion. He envisioned Buddhism as a moral regeneration and social emancipation of human beings from a class struggle which perpetually causes sorrow. Unlike Hinduism, Buddhism takes account of man in the social order and of his need for a moral and ethical basis. This is paramount, because morality is fundamental to a stable and happy life.⁶¹⁾ The Buddha's transformation of the traditional pattern of society and his initiation of Untouchables into his religious system inspired Ambedkar to equate the contemporary situation with that of the Buddha's, and to conceive of Buddhism as the most appropriate vehicle for the emancipation of the

Untouchables in the twentieth century.

Ambedkar's Buddhism turns on his vision of the Buddha's redefinition of Dhamma. No longer referring to Kamma (works) or Yanna (rituals) Dhamma now means morality. In Dhamma there is no place for prayers, pilgrimage, rituals, ceremonies or sacrifices; instead "in Dhamma, morality takes the place of God, although there is no God in Dhamma".⁶²⁾ Because religion refers to the social and secular as well as the spiritual, Dhamma has morality as its keystone. Dhamma means right relations between men in all spheres of life; Dhamma is pure religion whose purpose is to reconstruct the world by re-establishing appropriate human intercourse.⁶³⁾

In his book "The Buddha and his Dhamma", Ambedkar distinguishes Dhamma, a-Dhamma, and Saddhamma. Dhamma consists of maintaining purity of life in body, speech, and mind, reaching the six perfections in life, living in Nibbana (for Ambedkar, "righteousness"), giving up craving, believing that all compound things are impermanent, and believing that Kamma is the instrument of moral order.⁶⁴⁾ A-Dhamma consists of belief in the supernatural, in Ishwara, in Dhamma based on union with Brahma, in the soul, in sacrifices, in belief based on speculation, and in the effectiveness and infallibility of reading books on Dhamma.⁶⁵⁾ Saddhamma promotes wisdom over mere rote learning, and friendliness accompanied by morality and compassion. It destroys all social barriers between men and teaches the importance of a man's worth over his birth.⁶⁶⁾ Dhamma as religion belongs intrinsically to society - it no longer simply explains the origin of the world, but reconstitutes the whole creation for the life of man. Because Dhamma is basically social, morality is Dhamma and Dhamma is morality.

Ambedkar distinguishes between "Margadatas", those who give a way, and "Mokshadatas", those who give salvation. While Krishna, Muhammed, and Jesus are Mokshadatas, Buddha is a Margadata.⁶⁷⁾ By giving only the "way" Buddha focuses upon man's social life, and emphasizes his need for self-help and self-elevation. Ambedkar reveals this "way" in his book, written primarily from his study of the Dhammapada⁶⁸⁾, and arranged like the Christian Bible, with individual numbered verses for easy public reading. "The Buddha and his Dhamma" refashions the life of the Buddha, inserting Buddhist doctrine in appropriate places. The Buddha's story is a story of his rediscovery of the Dhamma. He rejects the Atman theory, nihilistic views, heretical views, views on the known beginning of the cosmos, and on the creation of man by god. He modifies the causal law, the theories of Kamma and transmigration, and the notion of salvation. He accepts the primacy of the mind, avoidance of all sinful acts, and the practice over preaching of religion.⁶⁹⁾ Most importantly, the Buddha claims no place for himself in his own Dhamma nor does he claim divinity - he was simply a man who showed the way.⁷⁰⁾

Traditional Buddhist soteriology is intertwined in Neo-Buddhist teaching. Desire and attachment lead to sorrow, and this desire must be overcome with the proper moral attitude, a pure mind, and a controlled self. The Buddha lives in a world where the fundamental laws of nature support a non-theistic moral order, manifested in the Causal Chain (Paticcasamuppada) and the working of Kamma. This moral order protects and develops a sense of the common good, without seeking help from divine authority. Since man is primarily consciousness, rebirth comes about only through the continuence of energy and the "regeneration of mat-

ter".⁷¹⁾ Karma is effective only in this life - it does not materially carry over, although it influences the quality of the next existence.

Ambedkar deals at length with the problem of lay and monk. Of the differences between a Bhikkhu and an Upasaka, the most radically divergent from ancient Buddhism is that an Upasaka can only enter Nibbana, while Bhikkhus can enter Parinibbana.⁷²⁾ The lay householder must shun bad conduct, refrain from dissipating his wealth through drinking or gambling, and know who is a true friend. Ambedkar prescribes a Vinaya for the wealthy, the householder, the child, the pupil, the husband and wife, the master and servant, and the girl. The lay are encouraged to follow all manner of social virtue in the Buddhist way of life. They must perform good deeds, keep good company, follow the right way, and be pure, wise, just, thoughtful, vigilant, earnest, bold, and kind. They must shun all evil, sin, craving, anger and hypocrisy.⁷³⁾

The Bhikkhu, related to the lay only through a bond of alms, belongs to the Sangha, which is characterized by admission open to people of all caste, sex or status. All are equal and, having taken vows, must abide by them in good conscience. As a member of the social organization of the Sangha, the Bhikkhu is not an ascetic or a Brahman priest, but one who has perfected his social virtues. A Bhikkhu's duty is to convert, not by miracles, force or sacrifice, but by spreading the gift of the Dhamma to all people.⁷⁴⁾ In Buddhism, conversion unites people intimately for the welfare of society and the spread of peace. The Bhikkhu is oriented not toward his own salvation but towards the betterment of human welfare. Ambedkar suggests that there be few Bhikkhus, and that they be highly edu-

cated to serve modern society.⁷⁵⁾

In November 1956, Ambedkar gave a speech on "Buddhism and Communism" to the Fourth Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Kathmandu. In it he details the renunciation of class exploitation and private property made originally by the Buddha, and only later advocated by Karl Marx. For Ambedkar, Marxism is thus superfluous and unnecessary if the social group has already embraced Buddhism - a highly superior choice, he thinks, both philosophically and morally.⁷⁶⁾ In his study of Buddhism, Ambedkar envisions the moral structure of society as an essential preliminary. He rejects Marxism because it holds that environmental and economic conditions rather than moral ones are the sole determinants of man. In addition, Marxism employs violence to attain its ends, rather than compassion, which for Ambedkar is fundamentally antagonistic to the Buddhist way.⁷⁷⁾

Ambedkar's Buddhism is a product of his own life and ideology. For him, Buddhism is a civil religion based upon ethical reform, in which social morality becomes sacralized. The Buddha's teaching is, in part, well suited to a practical social life and it appeals to Ambedkar because it preaches the importance of individual conscience rather than authoritarian laws. The Buddha's "exhortatory ethics"⁷⁸⁾ urge the performance of virtuous deeds conducive to a healthy human society which must have at its base a conscious morality. Ambedkar's Buddhism, a glorified social humanism, is an exhortation to moral goodness, whose precepts apply to the lay and more strictly to the monk. Although he includes soteriology in his recasting of the Buddha's sermons, Ambedkar's concern for salvation is minimal. He does not discuss meditation or the liberated state

of Nibbana - instead he remolds the Buddha's teachings on these subjects to fit his own social ethics. He is not concerned with the history of Buddhist sects, nor with the different kinds of Buddhism. Rather, he views Buddhism as a generic name for a socially cohesive system of moral righteousness. Of him, the Bhikkhu who translated his book into Hindi says,

There is no doubt that he had done something to Buddhism... Yet there are all kinds of Buddhism. In Ceylon it is different from Thailand, and that is different from Japan. Buddhism finds itself according to the country in which it is. No doubt, Ambedkar emphasized certain things more than others, but what he has done is to put Buddhism in a form whereby it will be understood by the people of the country, India. This needed to be done.⁷⁹⁾

The Neo-Buddhist Movement

Ambedkar believed that once Buddhism had arisen again in India, the Hindu populace would inevitably turn to it in mass conversions.⁸⁰⁾ Promulgating this Neo-Buddhism could be done through producing and diffusing a Buddhist Bible, modifying the organization, goal, and role of the Sangha, and creating a World Buddhist Mission. The Buddhist Bible should include a short biography of the Buddha, the Chinese Dhammapada, the most important dialogues of the Buddha, and the Buddhist ceremonies for birth, initiation, marriage and death.⁸¹⁾ The need for a Buddhist Bible was filled, as noted above, by Ambedkar's own book.

There were several modern Buddhist movements in India prior to that of Ambedkar's, but their influence extended only as far as specific local and social groupings.⁸²⁾ The main impetus for the particular movement of Ambedkar's was his mass ceremony performed on October 14, 1956 in Nagpur. This "Fourth Turning of the Wheel of the Law" involved

Untouchables largely from the Mahars of Maharashtra, Ambedkar's own caste, numbering about 500,000.⁸³⁾ Owen Lynch reports that most of Agra's Jatav caste (Untouchable leatherworkers) followed Ambedkar into Buddhism, enticed by the facts that Buddhism was an indigenous religion, that Buddhism was strongly anti-caste, that because Buddhism existed outside of India, foreign help for these "depressed" classes would come, and that the Untouchables, according to Ambedkar's theory, were originally Buddhist.⁸⁴⁾ For many Untouchables, then, Buddhism provided a rationale for working to eliminate the caste system. Those who did become Buddhist were later required to abide by a twenty-two vow statement of practice formulated in "World Buddhism" XIII, No. 9 (April 1965).⁸⁵⁾

With his death and the spread of the movement, Ambedkar became a culture hero and modern Bodhisattva. A "Charter of Demands" presented by the Republican Party to the government in 1965 and backed by a Satyagraha demonstration involving 300,000 people, headed its program with the demand that a portrait of Ambedkar be placed in the Parliament Building. In Agra his picture hangs in the meeting hall of the Municipal Corporation and resolutions have been put forward to erect a statue of him in the center of the city and to rename a road Ambedkar Boulevard.⁸⁶⁾ In Agra Ambedkar has been fully apotheosized by his followers. He is affectionately called "Baba Saheb", and "Jai Bhim" has replaced "Jai Hind" as the Untouchable slogan, with "Jai Buddh" added at religious occasions. The early facts of Ambedkar's mistreatment as an Untouchable have become legend, and parents hold him up as a model for their children. He is worshipped as a god, and poems and songs composed about him are recited on all festive occasions.⁸⁷⁾

Ambedkar's ashes were placed in an urn in a new Buddhist temple, established in Agra in May 1956. This temple was the first of several built in conjunction with the Neo-Buddhist movement.

The politics of the movement as well revolve around Ambedkar. In late 1956, Ambedkar announced the establishment of the Republican Party to serve all dispossessed peoples in India. In practice, the Republican Party aims at uniting all Untouchables against the predominantly caste Hindu Congress Party. In Agra, Untouchable politics bound up with the Republican Party are closely associated with the Buddhist movement. This association has alienated other castes who are sympathetic to Untouchable welfare. The leaders of the Party demand that Party members convert to Buddhism, and since Agra Buddhists are Untouchables, the Party has become a one caste Party.⁸⁸⁾

Buddhism in India has grown, but not significantly. The 1951 Census of India counted 180,823 Buddhists, while in 1961 there were 3,256,036 - a rise from 0.05% to 0.74% of the population, and an increase of 1,670.71% in all.⁸⁹⁾ In Agra, a Bharatiya Bodh Mahasabha was formed for Buddhist meetings, and there in November 1963 the first All India Buddhist Conference was held with Neo-Buddhists from the Punjab to Mysore attending.⁹⁰⁾

The conversion of Untouchables to Buddhism created an immense legal problem. The Buddhist Untouchable rejects the idea of untouchability upon conversion, but does not reject the benefits accrued from the government under its "protective discrimination" policy. The government, on the other hand, wants to treat caste as part of the Hindu religion, inferring that rejection of Hinduism means a re-

jection of all rights and obligations belonging to caste affiliation. Buddhists, then, cannot run for reserved seats in Parliament nor apply for government jobs reserved for Untouchables. Because of this and the fear of social boycott by caste Hindus, most Untouchables are not committed Ambedkarites. When Ambedkar converted he said,

I hope you will become Buddhists but this is up to you, therefore I won't press you to do so. However, as soon as I convert to Buddhism, I will not remain as a Scheduled Caste.⁹¹⁾

Ambedkar thus saw conversion as complete severance from Hinduism as well as from caste. This position has been upheld in the Indian courts. A Supreme Court decision deprived D.P. Meshram of Nagpur of his seat in the Maharashtra legislature on the grounds that his activities in Buddhism proved him a Buddhist and as such not eligible for the reserved seat. The decision was generally approved by Buddhists, since it affirmed their conviction that they were no longer Hindus.⁹²⁾ It also legitimized the idea that caste is basically a religious rather than a social term, a view confirmed by the Indian Census - "Scheduled Castes can belong only to the Hindu or Sikh religions".⁹³⁾

Concluding Remarks

For Ambedkar, Buddhism is a social and political tool as well as a religious ideology. He never hides the fact that he is continually concerned with cultural betterment for the Untouchables, and when channels for this are no longer open within traditional Hinduism he turns to Buddhism, hoping it will help bring about a more equal and just society. Although he claims his conversion is motivated by personal belief in the validity of Buddhist soteriology, Ambedkar's only apparent concern is the po-

litical and social effect of Buddhism among Untouchables. He is drawn to Buddhism because the Buddha tried to raise the status of servile classes in fifth century B.C. He embraces Buddhism both because he sees himself as a similar social reformer, and because as a movement, Buddhist Untouchables can be politically powerful.

In all of his activities, Ambedkar echoes a similar theme: separatism. As a solution to the constant questions facing him, Ambedkar consistently and automatically proposes separation rather than conciliation in such areas as Pakistan, linguistic states, the Untouchables and Buddhism.⁹⁴) When in 1940-41, the Muslims wanted their own country which would be ethnically more homogeneous and more conducive to Muslim well-being, Ambedkar supported them in opposition to the Hindu case against Pakistan, which decried the breach in India's unity and the weakening of her defenses. Ambedkar also advocated the division of India into "linguistic states" of equal size and homogeneous language. He fought bitterly for separate Untouchable electorates and their recognition as a political force outside of Hinduism. Finally his conversion to Buddhism confirms his antipathy to conciliation and affirms his "divide and live in peace" policy. Recognizing this separatist theme in Ambedkar's personality, Kuber calls the conversion a reactionary step, "his leap into escapism".⁹⁵) Are we to undermine the strength of his fight for Untouchable rights and his conversion to Buddhism simply because we recognize them as ideological extensions of a personal separatist policy? Rather, we must view this theme as an asset of Ambedkar's personality which longed to impute individual integrity to groups rather than suppress them in inauthentic unities.

Notes

- 1) Indian names and terms will appear in their accepted Anglicized form.
- 2) This term is used to designate those Hindus outside the four Varna system, as it is the one Ambedkar uses most - rather than Depressed Classes, Scheduled Classes Harijans, etc.
- 3) Biographical information, unless otherwise cited is taken from the following books: Dhananjay Keer, Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission, first edition (Bombay: India Printing Works, 1954); W. N. Kuber, Dr. Ambedkar: A Critical Study (New Delhi: Ahmedabad, Bombay: People's Publishing House, 1973); Jeannette Robbin, Dr. Ambedkar and His Movement (Hyderabad: Dr. Ambedkar Publications Society, 1964); and A.M. Rajasekhariah, B. R. Ambedkar: The Politics of Emancipation (Bombay: Sindhu Publications, Private Ltd., 1971).
- 4) Eleanor Zelliot, "Gandhi and Ambedkar - A Study in Leadership", in: *The Untouchables in Contemporary India*, edited by J. Michael Mahar (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1972), pp. 74-75.
- 5) Keer, op. cit., p. 142.
- 6) Owen M. Lynch, *The Politics of Untouchability* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), pp. 81, 87, 131; see also Owen Lynch, "Dr. B. R. Ambedkar - Myth and Charisma", in: Mahar, op. cit., pp. 97-112.
- 7) Lynch, *Politics*, pp. 133 ff.
- 8) Cf. B.R. Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* (Bombay: Thacker & Co., Ltd., 1945), p. 38; see also B.R. Ambedkar, *Untouchables and the Indian Constitution*, Indian Paper No. 4 at the Eighth Conference of the Institute of Pacific Relations, Mont Tremblant, Quebec, Canada, December 1942 (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations).
- 9) Kuber, op. cit., p. 65.
- 10) B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, Undelivered speech before the 1936 Annual Conference of the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal of Lahore (Published Bombay: B.R.

- Kadrekar, 1937), pp. 37, 38.
- 11) Ibid., p. 59
 - 12) D.C. Ahir, Buddhism and Ambedkar (New Delhi: Ajay Parkashan, 1968), p. 159.
 - 13) Lynch, Politics, p. 108.
 - 14) B.R. Ambedkar, The Untouchables, second edition (Balrampur, Gonda, U.P.: Jetavan Mahavihara, 1969), (First edition, 1948), pp. xiv, 39ff; see also B.R. Ambedkar, Who Were the Shudras? (Bombay: Thacker & Co., Ltd., 1946).
 - 15) Keer, op. cit., p. 91.
 - 16) Ambedkar, Congress, pp. 196ff.
 - 17) Robbin, op. cit., p. 138.
 - 18) Ambedkar, Annihilation, p. 56.
 - 19) Ibid., p. 59.
 - 20) Zelliott, "Gandhi", p. 76.
 - 21) Keer, op. cit., p. 53.
 - 22) Ambedkar, Annihilation, p. 57.
 - 23) Kuber, op. cit., p. 56.
 - 24) Ambedkar, Constitution, p. 18.
 - 25) Keer, op. cit., p. 45.
 - 26) Ibid., p. 220.
 - 27) Ambedkar, Constitution, p. 2.
 - 28) Ibid., p. 7.
 - 29) Kuber, op. cit., p. 80.
 - 30) Ambedkar, Constitution, pp. 2, 3, 18.
 - 31) Keer, op. cit., p. 352.

- 32) Ibid., p. 178.
- 33) Cf., Ibid., p. 205ff.
- 34) Kuber, op. cit., p. 79.
- 35) Ibid.
- 36) Keer, op. cit., p. 113.
- 37) Ibid., p. 265.
- 38) Ibid., p. 250.
- 39) D. R. Jatava, The Political Philosophy of Ambedkar (Agra: Phoenix Publishing Agency, 1965), pp. 190ff.
- 40) Ahir, op. cit., pp. 37, 133.
- 41) Ibid., pp. 24, 27.
- 42) Eleanor Zelliot, "Buddhism and Politics in Maharashtra", in: South Asian Politics and Religion, edited by Donald Eugene Smith (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 203.
- 43) Keer, op. cit., p. 103.
- 44) Ibid.
- 45) Zelliot, "Buddhism", p. 203.
- 46) Keer, op. cit., p. 232.
- 47) Zelliot, "Buddhism", p. 203.
- 48) Ahir, op. cit., p. 10.
- 49) Keer, op. cit., p. 246.
- 50) Ibid., p. 272.
- 51) Kuber, op. cit., p. 89.
- 52) Ibid.
- 53) Zelliot, "Buddhism", p. 203.

- 54) Keer, op. cit., p. 403.
- 55) Ibid., p. 423.
- 56) Kuber, op. cit., p. 92.
- 57) Ibid., p. 93.
- 58) Ibid., p. 90.
- 59) We are dealing with Ambedkar's idealized view of ancient Buddhism, and not with the Buddhism known to scholars from the Pali Canon.
- 60) Kuber, op. cit., p. 80.
- 61) B. R. Ambedkar, "Le Buddha et l'avenir du Bouddhisme", in: *Présence du Bouddhisme*, edited by René De Berval (Saigon: France Asie, 1959), pp. 552, 553, 557. (Originally published as "Buddha and the Future of his Religion" in the Maha Bodhi Society Journal, May 1950).
- 62) Ahir, op. cit., p. 154.
- 63) Kuber, op. cit., pp. 80-81.
- 64) B.R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and his Dhamma* (Bombay: Siddharth College Publications, 1957), pp. 229-242.
- 65) Ibid., pp. 249-275.
- 66) Ibid., pp. 281-308.
- 67) Ambedkar, "Le Buddha", p. 552.
- 68) D.R. Jatava, *The Social Philosophy of Ambedkar* (Agra: Phoenix Publishing House, 1965), p. 171n.
- 69) Ambedkar, *Buddha*, pp. 103-104.
- 70) Ibid., pp. 215-221.
- 71) Jatava, *Social*, pp. 197-203.
- 72) Ambedkar, *Buddha*, pp. 114-115; Nibbana here is Ambedkar's "righteousness", while Parinibbana approaches the original Buddhist Nibbana.
- 73) Ibid., p. 355ff.

- 74) Ibid., pp. 415-439.
- 75) Jatava, Social, p. 191.
- 76) Report of the Fourth World Buddhist Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists (Kathmandu, Nepal: Dharmodaya Sabha, Nepal Regional Centre of the W.F.B, 15th-21st November, 1956).
- 77) Jatava, Social, p. 167; see also D.R. Jatava, The Buddha and Karl Marx (Agra: Phoenix Publishing House, 1968).
- 78) Jatava, Social, p. 192.
- 79) Lynch, Politics, p. 158.
- 80) Ambedkar, "Le Buddha", pp. 555, 556.
- 81) Ibid., p. 558.
- 82) Cf. Heinz Bechert, "Contemporary Buddhism in Bengal and Tripura", Educational Miscellany, Vol. IV, Nos. 3&4, December 1967- March 1968; Heinz Bechert, Buddhismus, Staat, und Gesellschaft, Schriften des Instituts für Asienkunde in Hamburg XVII/1 (Frankfurt am Main, Berlin: Alfred Metzner Verlag, 1966), Vol. I, pp. 51-58; Adele Fiske, "Scheduled Caste Buddhist Organizations", in: Mahar, op. cit., pp. 113-142; see also Adele Fiske, "Buddhistische Bewegung in Indien", in: Buddhismus der Gegenwart, edited by Heinrich Dumoulin (Freiburg: Herder, 1970), pp. 72-88.
- 83) Robbin, op. cit., p. 170.
- 84) Lynch, Politics, pp. 92-93.
- 85) Bechert, Buddhismus, Vol. 3 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1973), p. 419.
- 86) Lynch, Politics, p. 118.
- 87) Lynch, "Ambedkar", p. 102.
- 88) Lynch, Politics, pp. 98, 108, 126.
- 89) Census of India 1961, Vol. I, Parts II-A (i & ii) and II-C (i). Published by A. Mitra, Registrar General and

ex-officio Census Commissioner for India.

- 90) Lynch, Politics, pp. 146, 152ff.
- 91) Ibid., p. 145.
- 92) Zelliott, "Buddhism", p. 207n.
- 93) Census, Vol. I, Part II-A (i), p. 34.
- 94) See B.R. Ambedkar, Pakistan or the Partition of India (Bombay: Thacker & Co., Ltd., 1940); B.R. Ambedkar, The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India (London: P.S. King & Son, Ltd., 1925); B.R. Ambedkar, The Problem of the Rupee (London: P.S. King & Son, Ltd., 1923); and B.R. Ambedkar, Thoughts on Linguistic States (Published by B.R. Ambedkar, Delhi, printed by Ramkrishna Printing Press, Bombay, 1955).
- 95) Kuber, op. cit., p. 293.