

The Buddhist renaissance in modern India: Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and the untouchables

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Abstract

This tells us too is redefined by him to vocalise his social and ethical concerns. To analyze these one must first look at the Dharma of Caste and then at the war of words between Dr. Ambedkar, the Jat Pat Todak Mandal (the caste breaker organisation) and Gandhi. Further the political action adopted by Dr. Ambedkar to foster the cause of the untouchables seems to fall into categories that are Buddhist in nature. The most important paradigm of this sort is the continuance of Dr. Ambedkar being regarded as a Bodhisattva like figure, who would ensure collective social upliftment. Such an image, I think was attributed to him more than projected by him. However this image was dynamic in the expanding context of the parliamentary politics of pre-independence India. Therefore this article has been divided into two sections. The first deals with the institution of caste and the Dr. Ambedkar Jat Pat Todak Mandal. Gandhi imbroglio, and the second with Dr. Ambedkar is Buddhist movement.

Keywords: Buddhist renaissance, modern India, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

1. Introduction

The caste system is deeply rooted in Hindu metaphysics. For centuries it has provided a rationale for preserving order in society by maintaining hierarchy. There have challenges to this hierarchy in the form of various religious and social movements aimed at an egalitarian social order. One of the more recent attempts has been by the Buddhist ideologue. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Distinguished by radical anti-Hindu feeling his work in pre-Independence India was a sharp reaction to the dehumanizing consequences of the Hindu social system. His politico-religious activity came towards the end of the age of Swaraj and reform when the historical urge was a regenerative return to origins for the purpose of abolishing social and political oppression.

Dr. Ambedkar aligned himself with this archeologizing movement embodied by Gandhi and chose finally to leave the Hindu system. Paradoxically he adopted religion as the point of reference for his new identity and used Buddhist concepts of society to redefine the social status of the Untouchable. The mass conversions to Buddhism in 1956, after decades of political action as well as the moves which he made in the war of ideologies interesting as specimens of anti-religious strategies which find their telos in religion.

This telos too is redefined by him to vocalize his social and ethical concerns. To analyze these one must first look at the dharma of caste and then at the war of words between Dr. Ambedkar, the Jat Pat Todak Mandal (the Caste-Breaker Organization), and Gandhi. Further the political action adopted by Dr. Ambedkar to foster the cause of the Untouchables seems to fall into categories that are Buddhist in nature. The most important paradigm of this sort is the continuance of Ambedkar being regarded as a Bodhisattva like figure who would ensure collective social upliftment. Such an image, I think was attributed to his more than projected by him. However this image was dynamic in the expanding context of the parliamentary politics of pre-Independence India. Therefore this article has been divided into two sections; the first deals with the institution of caste and the Dr.

Ambedkar Jat Pat Todak Mandal-Gandhi imbroglio, and the second with Dr. Ambedkar Buddhist movement.

Several models have been suggested for understanding caste and one of the most famous is Louis Dumont's dualistic opposition of renunciation and society posited against a monistic traditional system. Both the monistic and the dualistic models are useful. The first points us towards a basic orientation of the caste system in a center-periphery model in which ritual status and social power are structured around a central point of divine power. The Brahmins are closest to this axis of power by virtue of their ability to mediate between the many levels of divinity and social order. In ever-widening circles around this axis are the various castes and the most marginal of these are the untouchables.

The dualistic model posited by Louis Dumont in his *Homo Hierarchies* arranges the whole system around the 'necessary and hierarchical co-existence of the two opposites' of purity and impurity^[1]. In other words the work that people do, the materials they handle, their birth, their diet, all are ranked along a continuum of purity and impurity what people come into contact with in their daily work determines their caste. The Brahmins handle ghee and have access to divine power, the Sudras sweep the streets and handle faces or dead bodies. The relative pollution increases as one goes down the social order. The division of labor, the hierarchical ranking and the structured separation of castes are thus reducible for Dumont to the opposition of pure and impure which undergirds the system. There is no doubt that this is a basic insight into the nature of caste, but it is suspiciously simplistic. As Moffat notes the "indigenous definition of rank also contains ideas about auspiciousness, power and control."² and these work in the context of the traditional monistic formulations of ritual status.

Historically however these simple models are complicated by the pluralistic power relations between castes. There are degrees of mobility within the traditional system accomplished by what Srinivas terms Sanskritization, the imitation of higher caste ritual behavior by lower castes to improve their status.

This conceptualization moves closer to a plural characterization in which castes function as power-blocs within complex network of socio-economic relationship. The monistic and dualistic models are still the basic axes along which movements take place; historically these axes are complicated by social conditions. For instance, if the land in a village is owned by a lower caste then it is likely that a contractual relationship will exist between the Brahmans and that lower caste not a relationship of dominance. Similarly there has always been tension between the political dominance of the Kshatriyas and the ideological hegemony of the Brahmans arising from conflicting conceptions of what constitutes power knowledge or military prowess? In the context of the vote based parliamentary politics of twentieth – century. India the Untouchables led by Dr. Ambedkar constituted a power –block which was dynamic in the social religious and political realms.

Dr. Ambedkar was well aware of the historical and metaphysical dimensions of caste when he took up the cudgels against Gandhi and the reformist caste Hindus. The war started in the 1920s and 1930s when in a series of events. Dr. Ambedkar tried to force entry into temples and to improve human rights for the Untouchable. Finally as Harold Isaacs notes he came to the conclusion that the heart of the problem of Untouchability was the caste system itself ^[3]. Dr. Ambedkar was invited to Lahore to address an annual meeting of caste Hindus and speak about his ideas for reform. The year was 1936, and the committee was the Jat Pat Todak Mandal. Dr. Ambedkar penetrating analysis of caste focused on all the points we have mentioned above as determinants for understanding hierarchy. The division of labor lines of birth and the hierarchical segregation of castes on the notions of power and purity- impurity were attacked by him as causes of the social and ethical decay of the Hindu tradition ^[4].

The speech that he wrote for the occasion is full of fire and anguish and to summarize it is not easy. He looked at all fronts –the religious, political, economic, and social –and denounced caste as the fundamental obstacle to achieving progress on any of them. About politics he said: Every Congressman repeats the dogma of Mill that one country is not fit to rule another country must admit that one class is not fit to rule another class ^[5].

The political move by the Congress to suppress internal differences to get rid of the British was thus attacked by Dr. Ambedkar as intellectually dishonest and hypocritical. As for the British themselves they had Gandhi and the Civil Disobedience Movement on their hands; any movement that lessened the impact of the Congress was probably welcome to them. As Ainslie Embree notes (in the context of the Cripps Mission, “the British insistence on their responsibility to protect minorities had now become a dogma with them the full implications of which were fundamentally in conflict with the Congress commitment to a united India under a parliamentary democracy ^[6]).

I think that this comment reflects a consistent effort by the British to undermine the unity of the Nationalist movement by emphasizing the differences within India. Since Ambedkar came forth as a leader and spokesman for his community he could cause trouble for Gandhi and the Congress. Over the course of several decades, Ambedkar existed in an uneasy relationship with the Congress leaders. Gandhi fasted to prevent the Untouchables from getting separate electorates

(1932) his organic inclusive view of reality was threatened by Ambedkar apostasy of Hinduism. Nehru took note of his dynamism and ability and enlisted him as a framer of the Constitution and as Law Minister in the Cabinet of Independent India. Dr. Ambedkar eventually, spoke out against the slowness of social change and lashed out at Nehru for being weak –minded about the Hindu Code Bill due to opposition from orthodox Hindus 1951. He resigned from the Cabinet and the Congress made sure that he never got elected again by opposing him vigorously in the general elections.

At the 1936 Conference, however, Ambedkar views were radically anti –caste and anti –Hindu. About the regenerative urge that characterized the religious and social thought of the age he wrote: - “Hindu society seems to me in need of a moral regeneration which is dangerous to postpone. And the question is who can determine and control this moral regeneration? The Hindu leaders are quite unfit for the task. They unblushingly appeal to ideals of the past which have ceased to have any connection with the present...they have a mystic respect for the earlier forms which makes them opposed to any examination of the foundations of society.”⁷

Such statements were firmly grounded in social and historical reality but were positively offensive to caste Hindus and to Gandhi. The fundamental problem raised by Dr. Ambedkar was: Can one keep the Hindu religion after rejecting caste?

The answer according to the Jat Pat Todak Mandal and Gandhi was yes. The Mandal tried to obtain copies of his address before delivery ostensibly for printing but actually in order to scrutinize the contents. Ambedkar suggested that he have the copies printed in Bombay since it would be cheaper. The Mandal sent a man down from Lahore who did not discuss printing costs but asked what Dr. Ambedkar was going to say. After reading the speech, Har Bhagwan (the man from the Mandal) announced his displeasure at the demolition job that Ambedkar had done on Hinduism.

To the contemporary Arya Samaj reformist Hindus the sole canonical sources of authority were the Vedas. Har Bhagwan requested Dr. Ambedkar to excise all references to the Vedas ^[8]. Dr. Ambedkar also received letters from Lahore requesting his not to mention change of religion and the deconstruction of scriptures ^[9]. Nevertheless, Ambedkar had one thousand copies of it printed already and he refused to change one word of his speech. He went ahead and cancelled his appointment to speak when the Mandal insisted on censoring his address. Then he put the copies of the speech in the market with an account of how he was not allowed to speak his mind. Gandhi responded in the columns of the Harijan and Ambedkar printed a reply to the Mahatma’s article.

As has been stated earlier the Mahatma thought that Dr. Ambedkar views were too radical. Gandhi insisted that the absolute truth was actualizable in life and constantly referred back to Vedic and ascetic models structure his religious and political quest. About caste he wrote: - Caste has nothing to do with religion. It is custom whose origin I do not know for the satisfaction of my spiritual hunger. But I do know that it is harmful both to spiritual and national growth ^[10].

Here Gandhi seems to envisage an egalitarian society within the framework of the Hindu religious tradition. He condemns the institution of caste as being harmful and inessential to the spiritual quest. The true Hindu faith for him is not concerned with social stratification it is concerned with fulfilling universal human needs by actualizing the universal truth that

is expressed in phenomenal existence. Such a realization of truth he felt could not but yield solutions to the social and political problems that assailed India. Although the structures of power encoded in the Shastras were denounced by him as hideous later accretion to a core of spiritual teaching the ideal society was for him still divided into four great varnas. These would be defined by the division of Lahore according to the classical system of ancestral duty. The law of Varna teaches us that we have to earn our bread by following the ancestral calling. It defines our duties ^[11].

The vision of an egalitarian society with broad divisions was scornfully rejected by Dr. Ambedkar; he observed sarcastically that the Mahatma did not follow his own ancestral calling of Bania or merchant. For Ambedkar the whole idea of having divisions in society although basic to Hinduism promoted the oppressive ideology of the caste system. There will be outcaste as long as there are castes; he held 'Nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the desiccation of the caste system ^[12]. As for the hallowed authority of the scriptures the cover of his book 'Annihilation of Caste states in bright red letters: - If you wish to bring about a breach in the Caste system then you have got to apply the dynamite to the Vedas and the shastras which deny any part to reason to morality. You must destroy the religious of the shrutis and the smritis. Nothing else will avail.

Dr. Ambedkar demonstrates time and again that he is well aware of the historical nature of the formulations he is battling. The metaphysics repressive injustices and cruelties they foster in society. Indeed in his life and work we see an acute intelligence working to remedy the oppression he saw around him. He condemns regeneration by a return to origins as hopelessly nostalgic and irresponsible countering it by numerous examples of intolerance. The fundamental question of the oppression that Hinduism had established and maintained was thus answered in the negative by him he showed that while Gandhi might take the message of Hinduism to be something else the caste system was inherent in the social and metaphysical formulations of the Hindu tradition. Thus the dispute pinpointed in this vituperative war of words between him and Gandhi shows Ambedkar on strong ground. He did not see religion as only a social force he referred to it as a source for spiritual communion. However he engages in the same process of regeneration as Gandhi when he returns to Buddhism. It would be helpful to think of this residue in terms of a religious dimension which he felt was needed in the life of his community. He was willing to think independently about the past of his interest group and to forge a vision of the future based on his own social religious and ethical concerns. To see how this was done we need to turn to the movement that he led for several decades.

The attempted changes of the social system and the religious struggles we have discussed full into two distinct periods. The first from 1919 to 1935 shows Ambedkar working within the framework of the system to improve the status of the Untouchables. This period is marked by a sharp increase in the Visibility and power of the Depressed Classes and Ambedkar own elevation to the undisputed leadership of the caste to which he belonged, the Mahars. After the watershed statement at Yeola in 1935 ("I will not die a Hindu") his work enters a phase of searching for legislative political and religious means to redress the evils of the highly stratified social order from outside the Hindu religious tradition.

Protests against discrimination were made in the last years of the nineteenth century but they were largely in the form of grievances presented to the British. As Zelliott notes these remained complaints till the period of the Morley –Minto Reforms (1909), when communal electorates were granted to the Muslims and Hindus ^[13]. Then demands were made for representation in government and these grew increasingly vociferous. Dr. Ambedkar made his first public appearance in 1919 and from then on he was present at all the varied commissions that would address the issue of democratizing India ^[14]. It is not necessary to examine the complicated deliberations of all the committees and commissions during the 1930s. It would be sufficient to say that under Ambedkar leadership the Depressed Classes obtained increased representation in the legislative councils and gained in educational and legal rights. The skilled use of public platforms newspapers and self reform by Ambedkar led to "gathering momentum within a changing political framework ^[15].

All this politicking however did not lead to any commensurate improvement in religious and social rights for Untouchables. The anthropological models of caste that were discussed earlier were still operative. The Untouchables were still marginal people excluded from temples and denied any ritual status. Along the continuum of pure and impure they were still grouped on the impure side. They had followed Gandhi in besieging temples with Satyagraha and had engaged in civil disobedience and non-co-operation ^[16]. The caste Hindus however refused to give in on any from to the gentle pressure from Gandhi and his Harijans. Although the modern would the schools the police, the town councils the legislatures the mills slowly made a place for them the traditional structure in spite of their efforts from without and the work of reformers within could not be breached at these points which mattered to them ^[17].

The numerical weight of the Untouchables soon became politically significant it could prove crucial in the Hindu-Muslim squabbles for representation. Gandhi and the Congress Party wanted the Untouchable vote and thus there was a practical and political side to their protests against separate electorates for the Untouchables (1932). The Muslim League would welcome a group which did not identify with the mainstream of Hindu political and religious awareness forged by Gandhi and were prepared to do a lot to swell the ranks of the non- Congress electorates. Ambedkar was well aware of the politics of the situation when he announced his intention to convert in 1935. He planned to declare his change of faith at the annual meeting of the Jat Pat Todak Mandal. So far he had worked from within the system to gain political power in modernizing society. However the traditional roots of discrimination were still functioning. The pressure had been on the modernizing and the traditional sectors of society and now Ambedkar had found "a way to apply modern pressure even to the traditional structure ^[18].

In his speech on the Annihilation of Caste, Dr. Ambedkar defined his vision of society as follows: As ideal society should be mobile.... full of channels for conveying taking place in one place to other parts. In an ideal society there should be many interests communicated and shared..... varied and free points of contact with other modes of association ^[19]. This concept of a shared communality and of interaction among the different components of society was the goal to

attain, according to Ambedkar. The Hindu religion with his ontology of stratification had already been rejected by him. The Swaraj derived models of protects and politicization had failed in gaining him entry into the bastions of Hinduism. All efforts to rise in the traditional way, i.e., by the process of Sanskritization had failed. Throughout the early 1930s, he fought the system which denied him justice and self-respect by referring to the Untouchables as non-conformist Hindus. Two stands seem to be operative in his thinking at the time. The first is bitterly expressed in the speech at Yeola:

Because we have the misfortune of calling ourselves Hindus we are treated thus. If we were members of another Faith, none would treat us so. Choose any religion which gives you equality of status and treatment. We shall repair our mistake now. I had the misfortune of being born with the stigma of an Untouchable. However it is not my fault but I will not die a Hindu for this is in my power ^[20].

At the same time, Ambedkar was also aware of the religious needs of his people. He repeatedly stated that his religion would be a matter of principles. But the standards that he used to judge all religions were the standards of social justice. Therefore it is hardly surprising that he turned in the end to Buddhism. Indeed there are important similarities between the concepts advocated by Ambedkar the Buddhist metaphysic.

The first of the concepts is expressed in the Marathi word *manuski*, which means fellow-feeling humanity or fraternity. This is analogous, I think to ideas of loving kindness or *maître* which enjoin everyone to behave with love and compassion to all creatures. The metaphysic that he explains is based on liberty, equality and fraternity it is anti-ritual, anti-Brahmanical and anti-caste. In an interview to furnish ^[21]. While recognizing the double thrust of Ambedkar concerns we most look at the paradigms that he drew on from within the Indian tradition. We have already pointed to ideas of *maître* and compassion that seem to be basic to the Mahar way of thinking—these would seem to me to demand a Bodhisattva like figure who would lead all people to a stereological ideal. The second point of similarity would be a figure who denounced the strictures of orthodoxy to follow the path of Sramana. And the third would be the traditional bhakti model, which I think informed his apprehension of the figure of the Buddha. To support my contention, I am going to refer to the Buddha, Mahatma Phule (nineteenth century social reformer and educator), and Kabir, the medieval sant-kavi ^[22]. These men whom he considered the Gurus were the exemplars for his own thought and action.

The patterns that Ambedkar exemplified included the three paradigms that he mentioned and they evolved through his own historical development. There is evidence to show that he was thinking about Buddhism earlier on. There was a trend in the 1920s and the 1930s for many among the intelligentsia to turn to Buddhist ideas since its metaphysics were intellectually appealing and it involved an enriching return to religious ferment in ancient India. According to Zelliott's report, Ambedkar named his home 'Rajgriha' in 1934, his first college 'Siddhartha' in 1946, and his second college 'Milind' in 1951. His earliest contacts with Buddhist ideas seem to have occurred in the 1930s when he met with other Untouchables as well as reformists of the Kayastha caste who were considering conversion.

As Arvind Sharma indicates if the Untouchables converted to Islam or Christianity they ran the risk of becoming

denationalized ^[23]. For these reasons as well as the fact that Ambedkar was much impressed by the Buddha and his message the choice of Buddhism was a sensible one. Although he was aware of this message and was cognizant of the religious and social needs of the Untouchables, he waited for about twenty years before converting. He spent this time as Law Minister in the Nehru cabinet making laws to safeguard the minorities and framing the Constitution of India. During the 1940s, he moved closer to Buddhist organizations, and in 1950 he condemned Hinduism in the *Maha Bodhi Journal* as a religion based neither on morality nor on equality. He predicted a bright future for the enlightened Buddhist faith in India, provided that a canonical book was produced the Sangha reformed and aid obtained from Buddhist countries ^[24].

The two paradigms of Sramana and Bodhisattva emerge clearly in the Buddhist 'scripture' that he went on to produce himself. The work entitled *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, was glorified as a Nikaya and used as a canonical reference by the Untouchables who had converted to Buddhism. It is based on Asvaghosa's *Buddhacarita* and contains long sections on the Sangha and rules for social conduct. It is fascinating that he should choose this mode of leadership for it harks back to the Bodhisattvas of classical India who were moved by suffering to "teach and help all human beings" ^[25]. Renouncing their personal 'Nirvans' they made compassion for all living creatures the prime motive for their missionary activities. The goal was 'Bodhi' or 'Enlightenment' for themselves and for all sentient life.

To be a Bodhisattva the thought of Bodhi must first arise vows must be made to become a Buddha for the welfare and liberation of all creatures and greatness has to be predicted by a living Buddha. Once recognized as a Bodhisattva, the future Buddha must go through various stages or *Bhumis* practice numerous Dharma's and Paramitas (virtues), and perfect himself slowly till he reenacts the Enlightenment experience of the Buddha in his last life ^[26]. The second model is highlighted by the anti-ritual, anti-caste, anti-Brahman thrust of his message. This referred to the Sramana movements which arose in India at the time of the Buddha. The word itself means 'one who works or exercises rigorously' or ascetic practicing austerities out of the bounds of traditional society.

The Sramanas were severely critical of the Brahmin-based orthodoxy and sought their salvation elsewhere. Dr. Ambedkar's own work approximates some of these categories. He was constantly working for collective social and spiritual upliftment from outside the domain of traditional Sratana dharma. Of course his needs were the modern needs of his community and he redefined Nirvana and the whole teaching social and religious concerns.

To see how this was done let us look at the 'Scripture' that Dr. Ambedkar produced. As the introduction by Justice R.R. Bhole notes one of the basic orientations of Ambedkar's approach to Buddhism lies in his rationalistic method:

The Buddha's Dhamma was based on doctrine which were rationally possible. In no other religion are the values of knowledge and the evil of ignorance so much insisted on as they are in Buddhism....Dr. Ambedkar while writing this Nikaya of Buddhism tested the discourses with rigid tests...(only things which are) rational or logical may be taken to be the word of the Buddha ^[27].

This valorization of reason was carried out by systematically demythologizing all accounts of the Buddha and recasting his message in the light of Ambedkar own concerns. Passages which point this out are numerous. Here let us look at Ambedkar view of the Dhamma of the Buddha. The passage below comes at the end of a series of summary dismissals of Samadhi 'Vipassana,' metaphysics and mysticism. After stating that many believe these to be the essential message of the Buddha, Ambedkar poses the following question:

"Did the Buddha have no Social Message?"

When pressed for an answer, students of Buddhism refer to the two point. They say---

"The Buddha taught Ahimsa."

"The Buddha taught peace?" Asked ---"Did the Buddha give any other Social Message?"

"Did the Buddha teach justice?" "Did the Buddha teach liberty?"

"Did the Buddha teach equality?" "Did the Buddha teach fraternity?" "Could the Buddha answer Karl Marx?"

These question are hardly ever raised in discussing the Buddha's Dhamma.

My answer is that the Buddha has a Social Message.

He answers this entire question. But they have been buried by modern authors [28].

There are numerous passages like the one above and they are interesting because they show Ambedkar as the anti-traditionalist who cannot lose sight of the fact that his tradition has sanctioned untold social oppression. While embodying the anti-orthodox thrust of the Sramana movement they worked within the context of the scripture. In other words, they defined the ultimate concerns of his religion around a different source of authority one that brought the believe closer to the center of things. His work shows a new Sum mum bonum – one that is very pragmatic this worldly, ethical and social Ambedkar's Nirvana is based on a metaphysics of Sunyata (void), which sees worldly life as a conditioning and offers practical solutions to it. However, he de-emphasized the spiritual ideals of contemplation awareness and Mediation to inject Buddhism with a good dose of parliamentary politics. As we shall see, he used other models taken from the Indian tradition to satisfy his spiritual needs within the context of his Buddhist beliefs. From the mainstream of the Buddha's ideas, he took ideas of Maître of dharma pulling down all social barriers and the universal practice of 'Panchasila'. He constantly stressed what he considered were the fundamentals of the Buddha's Dhamma.

Now what is Dhamma? And why is Dhamma necessary?

According to the Buddha, Dhamma consists of Prajna and Karuna.

What is Prajna? And why Prajna? Prajna understands. The Buddha made Prajna one of the two cornerstones of His Dhamma because he did not wish to leave any room for superstition.

What is Karuna? And why Karuna? Karuna is love. Because without it society can neither live not grow that is why the Buddha made it the second cornerstone of his Dhamma. A unique amalgam of Prajna and Karuna is the Dhamma of the Buddha [29].

This is a revisionary definition of the basic of society and life under the Buddha's Dhamma and again Ambedkar clarifies that he wants Enlightenment, wisdom, love and compassion to be the constituents of right action in society. The Bodhisattva

ideal emerges in this too since no Viharas were established by Ambedkar; he was very conscious of ordinary people as the locus of his concern just as the Bodhisattva figure was in some senses a movement away from the 'lack of the true spiritual fervor and altruism among the monks of that period [30]. (ca. 200 B.C.?) Thus although he was not an organizer of monastic order he did put his heart into ensuring justice and self-respect for all his people. As he began to work from outside the social system he also took on-aspects of the Sramana paradigm where the programme for liberation from the toils of worldly life is forged outside the orthodox (and orthopraxy) community. However Ambedkar never renounced the world rather he can he said to have followed a Middle Path. There is no doubt that his people saw him as a potential Buddha. For instance the picture of Ambedkar with which The Buddha and His Dhamma is prefaced shows him as going to his Mahaparinirvana, not to his death.

To understand the final strand in the synthesis of social action and spiritual fervor that Ambedkar forged we need to examine the account of the conversion ceremony and speech that Zelliott provides (After Dharma Diksa) Ambedkar spoke in simple and colorful Marathi to the now converted Buddhists.... How spoke of the Mahars giving up the drugging out of cattle and the eating of that meat in earlier days, and the criticism of caste Hindus of that improvement. He contrasted the life of a virtuous woman living with dignity to the earlier life of the prostitute evidently making these points to urge his audience to sacrifice for self-respect. He quoted his own words at Yeola. "I will not die in the Hindu religion," and added that today he felt as if he had left hell (and those nearest him said that he wept as he said this). He spoke of his own hard life and his own achievements and then his words were punctuated by applause alternately praised Buddhism and criticized Hinduism. The printed version of the two hour speech which must be greatly shortened is rambling and personal full of anecdotes of Mahar life, Ambedkar 's life and the Buddha 's teaching Nevertheless the idea emerged that Buddhism is moral religion a religion of equality and a religion respected by the world [30].

I think that such a ceremony with its attendant symbolism of rebirth and the emotions felt by both Ambedkar and his audience is functionally analogous to an experience of bhakti, a kirtan or may be a black Gospel meeting (Hearme, Lawdt). The following description of the Buddha in Ambedkar's books is in the medieval Indian tradition of hagiography and love poetry.

From all accounts the Blessed Lord was a handsome person. His form was like the peak of a golden mountain. He was tall and well built with a pleasing appearance. His long arms and lion gait his bull-like eyes and his beauty bright like gold his broad chest attracted everyone to him. His brows his forehead his mouth or his eyes his body his hands his feet of his gait – whatever part of him anyone beheld that at once riveted his eyes [32].

There is a whole section like the one above full of eulogizing description of the Buddha. At one point Dr. Ambedkar calls him a 'real glamour boy.' The emphasis of course was on one's spiritual needs being satisfied by the presence of the Buddha. However the Buddha himself does not claim anything supernatural for himself in respect Dr. Ambedkar remains faithful to the Buddha's ideas. I think that there is ambivalence a tension in these last two passages between the rationalist

non-supernatural Dr. Ambedkar and the spiritual needs he felt. While it would be over simplifying to say that they fall totally within the categories of kirtan experience or of medieval nakh-sikh (head-to-foot) descriptive poetry. I think they are suggestive of those. And there is the fact that Dr. Ambedkar considered Kabir his Guru and that his father was a Kabirpanthi. Therefore, I think that a plausible case may be made for the bhakti element in Ambedkar's religiosity.

The religiosity that he forged into a Buddhist movement thus came to its culminating experience in October 1956. With its dual thrust-sacred and secular-and the three typologies that seem to prevail in the conceptualization of Ambedkar activities, it became a dynamic and attractive synthesis that achieved communal regeneration through legal political and religious methods. In December 1956, two months after the conversion, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar died. In his wake he left an organized politico-religious movement one which could continue to take refuge in the Triple Gem and in the vision of an egalitarian rational and human society. He founded his ideal society on the ideas of a radical new metaphysic which was also ancient and Indian. His basically revisionary attitude towards religion had deep consequences in the lives of the Depressed Classes in India. Dr. Ambedkar can truly be remembered as one of the most dynamic and contentions figures of this century. With his polemicist style his fearless search for self-respect and his socially relevant religion he fought for the rights his people deserved. He often said that while religion was an attempt to reveal beginnings his Dhamma was non-mystical practical and this –worldly. Maitri, Karuna, Panchsila and Prajna-these are the terms of the modernizing metaphysic drawn substantially from ancient Indian sources. All in all a brilliant synthesizer who used all his personal national and spiritual resources to regenerate his people and guide them to a better future. From the issues first highlighted by the imbroglio in 1936 to the final conversion his dynamic leadership made it possible for many human beings to move towards a social Nirvana.

Buddham Saranam Gacchami.
Sangham Saranam Gacchami.
Dharmam Saranam Gacchami.

(Oath taken by about half a million people on October 14th and 15th, 1956.)

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