

Dr. Ambedkar's Interpretation of Buddhism:

Buddhist Concept of Samya in Ambedkar's Thought

Conversion as a means of escaping the caste system had already been tried by many Untouchables. It is worth mentioning that conversion to another religion was a way to escape from the disabilities of untouchability in Hinduism. Dr. Ambedkar reckoned that social hierarchy was essential to the Hindu religion. To get out of it meant attainment of equality and self-respect. More than political and religious man is social animal. He may not have or need not have religion; he may not have, needed not have politics but he must have a society. The wretched society based on Caste and Untouchability, had for ages treated the untouchables of India worse than serfs and slaves. Dr. Ambedkar was convinced that there is no salvation within Hinduism for untouchables. He rightly attributed the low-status, degradation and low-esteem of untouchables to a social system that was backed by Hinduism. Hence, conversion to Buddhism was the only way to get emancipation from the age-old caste-ridden Hinduism.

Socio-political Reasons for choosing Buddhism for the Untouchables: The conversion of the Dalits from Hinduism to other religions was one of the main agendas of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's life since he fully believed that this was the only way for their liberation. He reached this conclusion after struggling for more than two decades for the basic human rights of the Dalits within the Hindu fold. It is true that on 13th October, 1935, he declared in a Conference held at Yeola in Nasik, his definite intention of changing his religion in the presence of more than 10,000 Dalits but his struggle towards his end began much earlier in the Mahad Satyagrahas in 1927. The Jalgaon Conference of 29 May 1929 passed a resolution and called all the Depressed Classes people to embrace any religion other than Hinduism.¹ Ambedkar addressed the Dalits present in the Yeola Conference in these words: The disabilities we have suffered, and the indignities we had to put up with, were the result of our being the members of the Hindu Community. Will it not be better for us to leave that fold and embrace a new faith that would give us equal status, a secure position and rightful treatment? I advise you to sever your connection with Hinduism and to embrace any other religion. But, in doing so be careful in choosing the new faith and see that equality in treatment, status and opportunities will be guaranteed to you unreservedly. Unfortunately for me I was born a Hindu Untouchable. It was beyond my power to prevent that, but I declare that it is within my power to refuse to live under ignoble and humiliating conditions. I solemnly assure you that I will not die a Hindu.² Dr. Ambedkar asked his people to ponder over the causes for their sufferings extending over long period of two thousand years. He asserted that the Hindu Dharma was the main cause. Of all religions in the world it was Hinduism that recognised caste distinctions and Untouchability. This was the cover, the cloak, for all injustices perpetrated on the Scheduled Castes by Caste Hindus. The position even today, he regretted to say, was that in villages they could not live with self-respect. He, therefore, reiterated his conviction that they must discard Hinduism and refuse to submit to indignities any longer.³ The social degradation of the Untouchables having had religious sanction under Hinduism, the untouchables have nowhere to go but to get out of this gas chamber of Hinduism and seek fresh air under other liberating religions like Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism, etc. Therefore, conversion to other religions had become popular among the untouchables. Not because after conversion to Christianity and Islam the "problem of poverty" would be solved. And for them poverty is not the number one problem. Man cannot live by bread alone. He wants self-respect which is denied under

Hinduism. They will get it the moment they get out of Hinduism and convert to other religions. Untouchables have discovered that conversion helps them as they will no longer be subjected to atrocities. Conversion to other realigns, therefore, helps the Untouchable to gain dignity and self-respect.⁴ Dr. Ambedkar emphasized (a) the need of the untouchables for self-respect (b) the reality of the division between caste Hindu and Depressed classes, which had to be acknowledged if any justice was to be done (c) the belief that the Brahmin's deep ingrained ethnocentrism has prevented a reconstruction of Hindu society and stood in the way of aversion of vested rights for the common good.⁵ Dr. Ambedkar envisaged ¹⁵⁵ that the Hindu society was static, Untouchability was recognized by Hindu religion and caste was the corner-stone to the arch of Hinduism. He weighed the merits of the Hindu dharma as against the merits of Buddhism and finally resolved to embrace Buddhism.⁶ However, the reasons for which Dr. Ambedkar preferred the Buddhism can be summarized thus: (1) He tried to prove that the Untouchables were Buddhists. In his thesis on the Origin of (2) Untouchability, he made it clear that today's Untouchables were once Buddhists. (3) Buddhism was an Indian religion and the Buddha was nearer to the Untouchable masses. (4) The Untouchables would join with the World Buddhist community and thus pave the way for World brotherhood.