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# The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

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## **CONVERSION AND DALIT IDENTITY: STUDY OF THE WRITINGS OF AMBEDKAR**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the role of religious conversion in redefining Dalit identity through the writings and activism of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Within the hierarchical structure of the Hindu caste system, Dalits have historically been subjected to systemic oppression, with caste identity assigned at birth and reinforced by religious doctrine. Ambedkar's scholarship and political activism revealed that Hinduism's caste-based framework was resistant to reform, prompting his search for an alternative path to social equality. He identified religious conversion as a means for Dalits to reclaim their dignity and escape caste-based discrimination. After extensive study, Ambedkar chose Buddhism, a religion he saw as embodying principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. The mass conversion of Dalits in 1956 represented both a rejection of caste oppression and an assertion of a new collective identity. However, this paper critically evaluates whether conversion succeeded in dismantling caste hierarchies or merely reconfigured them within a different religious framework. While conversion provided a philosophical foundation for social transformation, caste-based prejudices remained entrenched in Indian society. Through an analysis of Ambedkar's writings, speeches, and political engagements, this study assesses the long-term impact of conversion on Dalit identity and social mobility. It argues that while conversion was a significant act of resistance, structural inequalities required deeper societal change beyond religious shifts. This research contributes to ongoing discussions on caste, religion, and social justice, offering insights into the complexities of identity formation in postcolonial India.

### **Keywords**

Religious Conversion, Dalit Studies, Ambedkar, Social Justice, Resistance, Casteism, Reform, Indian Politics.

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An individual is identified as a Dalit when born in the *avarna* section of the Hindu society. This birth, a sheer accident, happens to an individual and is not acquired; but holds the capacity to determine the entire course of one's lifetime. In Hinduism, it is impossible for one to escape his caste. A foetus belongs to a caste and so does a corpse. Along with this identity comes a set of age old codes that one must abide by in the society and for Dalits it includes removing garbage, scavenging, slavery, and disrespect. It was unacceptable for Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. A pioneer in bringing Dalit experience to the academic mainstream, Ambedkar occupied this Brahmanical territory to critically examine the culture and exert power through this agency. Writing is insurrection as a practice which dismantles hegemony. In the course of this paper, I survey the writings of Ambedkar to explore the theme of identity in his concept of conversion. In an order, it focuses on (1) the problem with Hinduism, (2) Ambedkar's efforts to reform it, (3) his realisation that it cannot make for an egalitarian society, (4) opting for conversion as the ultimate solution to casteism, (5) choosing Buddhism over other religions, and (6) aftermath of the great conversion. Amalgamation of a great politician and an exceptional thinker enabled bringing about a revolution in the lives of those who had not experienced anything other than oppression.

Dalit identity is a social imposition rooted in religion. Hinduism organises its followers through a *chaturvarna* system wherein exists four primary castes namely Brahmins (priests), Kshatriya (rulers), Vaishya (merchants), and Shudra (labourers). This division of people is problematic as it not only divides the people but in a hierarchical order. The remaining people who were engaged in menial work were put outside the caste system as Ati-Shudra. This structure is accepted as the word of god and *Manusmriti* lays down dharma rules for it to function. As prominent in most societal structures, here too, a dominance of the priestly class over the rest is apparent which creates hegemonic relations. Consequently, the Brahmins exercise most power whereas Ati-Shudras become Dalit, a term that refers to the ones who are "broken" or "oppressed." Apart from being treated as Untouchables in the social domain, they witness only plight in political, economic, and educational spheres. The whole society

remains numb for this lowest section being devoid of the fundamental human rights because it is immemorially embedded with inequality and therefore these casteist traditions are accepted as a law of nature. Each caste adopts a strict endogamous matrimonial regime to maintain the caste system. Even during the national movement for freedom from Britain in the twentieth century, the subject of nation was presumed as a unified reality. Soumyabrata Choudhary characterises the nature of contemporary society as rather “divisive.” The movement was led by the Indian National Congress which did not recognise caste issues as their primary agenda. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was at the centre of the party and believed in *varna-shrama dharma*. He was protective of the caste system and stated that though it had limitations and defects yet there was nothing sinful about it. Most members of the party were Brahmins who, being on the privileged side, paid little or no heed to first establish equality within the religion. One such nationalist Bal Gangadhar Tilak famously said, “Swaraj is my birthright, and I shall have it.” His determination and struggle against British imposition of power is remembered in the history of India but his hypocrisy lays naked when in his refusal to sign a petition for untouchability abolition in 1918. In this context, the concept of Swaraj equates with Brahmin domination only. The question of the emancipation of the Depressed classes remains unanswered. The state is comparable to the Athenian democracy where women, slaves and outsiders had no political rights. Such obsolete inclination based on inequality and exclusiveness showcase Hinduism and its propagation of *chaturvarna* to be highly discriminatory for the marginalised section particularly in modern times.

However, Dr BR Ambedkar decides to break this “natural” consensus. The British colonial rule introduced an opportunity for soldiers and their children to access education which allowed the Mahars from Konkan and Western Ghats of India experience a life outside the cage of caste. Having served in the British India Company, the family of Ambedkar also benefitted from the same. He even received Baroda State Scholarship for pursuing post-graduation at Columbia University in New York City. In his brilliant student profile, his paper *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development* holds immense cruciality. This “organic intellectual” decodes the origin and anatomy of Caste, a topic which he was exposed to in his own life. These experiences with untouchability are recollected by him in *Waiting for Visa* with an intention to introduce the social ill to those who are unfamiliar with it. His childhood journey to Goregaon, accommodation in Baroda, accident in Chalisgaon, visit to the fort of Daulatabad are some of such casteist incidents which made a strong impression on him. While studying in Columbia University, he learnt about African Americans’ protest against racial inequality in the US. Harlem Renaissance was emerging at this time. Writing and circulating literature was the means of protesting. It aimed at awakening a consciousness of self esteem among the Blacks. Ambedkar seemed to be influenced it because he worked towards uniting the Depressed Classes through his writings after he returned to India. *Mooknayak* (1920) was his first such endeavour. It can either be translated into “the silent hero” or “the leader of the mute.” The title encourages the reader to be silent no more, rather reclaim the freedom of the oppressed community by leading them to be active, unlike Gandhi’s *Harijan* which represents an identity given to one who was too passive to assert oneself. *Mooknayak* has the revolutionary force (aagraha) that *Harijan* lacked, said Aishwary Kumar. Ambedkar launched two more

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Marathi publications namely Bahishkrit Bharat and Janata to provide an alternative to the biased mainstream media but the periodicals had to shutdown because of financial difficulty.

Ambedkar then went on to establish *Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha* (1924) to carry grievances of the Depressed Classes to the government. When Southborough Committee was set up for the formation of the Government of India Act 1919, he demanded separate electorates and reservations for the Depressed classes and religious minorities in India. He also attacked Vitthal Ramji Shinde for representing Dalits at the Committee because even though he built schools and hospitals for Dalits, Ambedkar believed that they need to represent themselves instead of allowing paternalistic attitudes of the upper castes. Similarly, he worked for a constitutional safeguard for the marginalised when he was appointed to work with Simon Commission in 1925. Mahad. In 1927, he began an active movement against untouchability which proved to be catastrophic. Mahad Satyagraha is comparable to the French Revolution. In his speech at the event Ambedkar addressed the participants by saying, "Why so we fight? It is not simply for drinking water; drinking the water will not give us very much. It is not even a matter of only of our human rights, though we fight to establish the right to drink water. But our goal is no less than that of the French Revolution. This was fought for the reconstruction of society, for the eradication of the old society based on feudal inequality and the establishment of a new society based on liberty, equality and fraternity. Similarly, we want to end the old inhuman caste society based on inequality and reconstruct the world, reconstruct society on the basis of liberty, equality and fraternity. This is our goal!" Ambedkar sees a different model of the society. He subsequently burns *Manusmriti* publically because the text ideologically justifies untouchability. Ambedkar's numerous attempts portray his determination to reform Hinduism, make Dalits self reliant and socially conscious in order to establish an egalitarian society.

Ambedkar soon comes to realise that it is impossible to exert an identity free of caste being a Hindu. It was not because of the lack of revolutionary movements but for the fact that Hinduism cannot exist without caste system. There was a lack of strong opposition against caste system from the front of savarna nationalists. For instance, Gandhi opposed ill treatment of the Untouchables, he remained inactive in Harijan Sevak Sangh who policies were initially formed by him for the welfare of the community. He supported neither Mahad Satyagraha nor Kala Ram temple Satyagraha. He also spoke against the issue of separate electorates in Round Table Conference. Ambedkar writes: "Mr. Gandhi himself could not give a logical and consistent defence of his opposition to the untouchables. Inside the Round Table Conference his defence was that the Hindus had seriously taken up the cause of the untouchables and that therefore there was no reason to give the political safeguards. Outside the Round Table Conference he gave totally different reasons." Ambedkar had previously observed hypocrisy in his Gujarati and international interviews on the subject of caste.

He even went for fast unto death to cancel the Communal Award which had given the Depressed Classes to represent themselves for the first time in the history of the nation. His only reason behind this opposition was the possible harm it could cause to Hinduism. Ambedkar "responded to the call of humanity, to save Gandhi from sure death" and ended up agreeing on the Poona Pact. All such instances made Ambedkar realise that casteism is deeply rooted in Hinduism and within Hindus. What is visible is

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mere facade for political gains. Even Indian National Congress was filled with Hindus who were intolerant and discriminatory to not only Muslims but the lowest sections of their own religion. The party had representatives from across the Indian subcontinent but no space for an individual belonging to the Depressed classes who could represent his own community. It implemented programmes to eradicate untouchability but abandoned them abruptly. Not only is Hinduism highly intolerant to reformation but it also has a tendency to transform dissent to assemble within itself. "Buddha utilised the Hindu inheritance to correct some of its expression. He came to fulfil, not to destroy," said Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. But Buddhism as well as other previous attempts to reform Hinduism, either ended up becoming new religions themselves or the reformers were "hindu-ised." For instance, Gautama Buddha is popularly considered to be an *avatar* of Vishnu even though he himself was not a devotee of any Hindu God. Despite being aware of such tendencies in Hinduism, Ambedkar remained optimistic and determined with his role as an activist and kept working for the rights of the Depressed Classes. He successfully secured them reservations in the government sector but despite these affirmative actions being carried out, Ambedkar realised that as long as the untouchables are the beneficiaries of reservation in education, employment, etc, they will always be looked down upon as quota people. And therefore a brand new identity was required which would prevent them from being seen by others as second class citizens.

The inability and impossibility to create a casteless Hinduism made Ambedkar consider conversion to another religion as the ultimate solution to escape caste discrimination. "I solemnly assure you that I will not die a Hindu," said Ambedkar in his speech at the Yeola Conference held on October 1935. Addressing ten thousand Untouchables, he shares his painful realisation that the efforts he made to secure basic human rights of the Depressed classes ended up futile. He proposed moving away from Hinduism and seek conversion to another faith to lead a life of equality which they were always denied of. Though it was beyond his capability to not be born as an untouchable, he has the power to refuse living a life of humiliation. Next year, he wrote an essay *Away from Hindus* where in he talks about community and kinship. Kinship refers to flesh, blood and family connection. Ambedkar come to realise that *savarna* Hindus will never consider the Depressed classes as part of their own kin. They are outside kinship. They cannot be part of the Hindu community. And therefore Hinduism cannot be reformed to create an egalitarian society and conversion is the only ray of light for the Depressed Classes. But why did Ambedkar shift from one religion to another instead of completely giving up on the structure? Ambedkar believed that the modern world needs religion more than ever before. However, religions in the modern world must walk hand in hand with science. He believed that conversion into an appropriate religion would be a mode of social change as well as a way of identity reformation. Elaborating on the same, he said, "you must give a new doctrinal basis to your religion - a basis that will be in consonance with liberty, equality and fraternity, in short, with democracy. It means a complete change in outlook and in attitude towards men and things. It means conversion." On similar grounds, agree Burke said that "true religion is the foundation of society, the basis on which all true civil government rests." In the same year, Ambedkar remarked in his explosive text *Annihilation of Caste* that caste can never make for an egalitarian society. Even bodies like *Arya Samaj* that emerged from a

reform movement, give a different definition of caste but even that is graded equality. At the end of his speech he said that this is his last address to a Hindu audience, indicating that he is going to depart from Hinduism. Almost 20 years before he actually converted, Ambedkar addressed the Mahars, a section of the community considered untouchable in Mumbai, sharing his decision to convert in a lengthy yet influential speech. Ambedkar urged "I tell you all very specifically, religion is for man and not man for religion. For getting human treatment, convert yourselves. Convert for getting organised. Convert for becoming strong. Convert for securing equality. Convert for getting liberty. Convert so that your domestic life should be happy." Ambedkar believed in the power of voluntary conversion. He educated the Depressed Classes and pushed them to open eyes to the problems in traditional social codes. A religion which does not treat one as a human being, rather worse than animals, must be abandoned. A religion which prohibits its followers from visiting temples, taking water from a public tank and getting a job is not worth following. Ambedkar finds such a religion nothing more than a disease or punishment. Numerous generations of the Depressed Classes spent their lives feeling, just as Ambedkar, that they "don't have a homeland." They faced alienation in their place of birth and were kept aloof from minimal sense of respect. Conversion brought hope for a new identity free from the labels that one receives by birth. Thus conversion was both a means of escaping maltreatment as well as building up an identity of pride.

Ambedkar critically examined several religions and contemplated for almost two decades before his conversion. Christianity and Islam were argued against as caste system had penetrated into these religions and therefore a consequent act of conversion would remain fruitless. Ambedkar thought differently,

Firstly, it must be noted that though castes exist among Christians and Muslims, it is not the chief characteristic of their body social...it is evident how caste has prime importance in the Hindu religion, and how minor it is in Christianity and among the Muslims. There is one more difference between the caste system of the Hindus and that of the Muslims and Christians. The caste system among the Hindus has the foundation of religion. The castes in other religions have no sanction of their religion. If Hindus proclaim [that they intend] to disband the caste system, their religion will come in the way. On the other hand, if the Muslims and Christians start movements for abolishing the caste system in their religion, their religion will not obstruct. Hindus cannot destroy their castes without destroying their religion. Muslims and Christians need not destroy their religion for eradication of the castes. Rather, their religion will support such movements to a great extent.

Though Ambedkar addressed general queries of apparent casteism in Islam and Christianity, he decided that he would not opt for them. After a lot of deliberation he decided not to convert to an established religion because they already have their organised structures and hierarchies and if Dalits enter their religion, they will become new neighbours and therefore will not get the same equality. The other problem was that he shied away from radical change like Islam and Christianity. According to Gauri Vishwanathan, the reason behind this choice was "the foreignness" associated with these religions. Buddhism, on the other hand, originated in the Indian subcontinent and would prevent his betrayal of *Bhartiya* culture. It is also believed that Ambedkar's forty year long journey to Buddhism began when Dada Keluskar gave him a copy of

biography of Gautama Buddha at the age of sixteen. Ambedkar was profoundly influenced by the book and the possible reason that could have driven his choice was that Buddhism met his core values of rationality, morality, and justice. Buddhism helped him realise his primary requirements from a religion, that is “the exercise of individual choice based on reason and historical consciousness.” But he did not accept the conventional Buddhism. He reread and modified some tenants of the religion to fit his idea of Buddhism, particularly by including the values of equality, fraternity and liberty from the French Revolution. His reinterpretation is known as Dalit Buddhist movement or Navayana or Neo- Buddhism. This republican Buddhism was remodelled in terms of the class struggle and social justice which can be credited to his education in the West. He developed it a manner that could offer maximum benefit to its followers. Buddhism is not a religion but *dhamma*. And therefore Buddhism is an instrument of social change. ‘Away from the Hindus’ ‘What Path to Salvation’ are important writings of him in this context where he clarifies that “religions in the modern world cannot afford to eulogise poverty, nor can it afford to be inconsistent with science. Buddhism is the religion of the intellectual, and spells out its way of life which in principle rational, moral, humanist and social.” Ambedkar had a rationalist and humanist approach towards life and Buddhism allowed him to place emphasis on reason and natural faculties of human instead of some supernatural revelation. And hence Dr. BR Ambedkar quit Hinduism and converted to Buddhism on 14 October, 1956. He was not alone. Close to 3.6 lakh of Ambedkar’s followers converted with him in Nagpur. And although Ambedkar did not live long enough to practice the religion that he so well espoused, his reinterpretation of the religion still remains significant to millions.

But did conversion prove to be an effective method of escaping the stigma and humiliation associated with the identity of Dalits or a mere attempt to disguise their caste with a new label? The act of conversion manifested as a wonderful spectacle. Mass of half a million people dressed in same white followed Ambedkar who administered the oath of Buddhism in Nagpur. It seemed as if equality, unity and solidarity have been achieved. But when they go back to their ordinary lives, their lifestyle and even perspective undergo challenges. They did pledge to leave their old identity and old community to take up a new identity and new community but how much internalisation actually takes place within them? Living in the casteist society the untouchables had deeply inherited certain ideas that it propagated. Ambedkar viewed caste as not a division of labour but labourers. It is not only the exploitation of one caste by another but graded inequality. In north India the *chamars* look down upon the *bhangis* and this kind of hierarchy which is inbuilt in caste cannot automatically disappear with a change in identity. Along with the feeling of caste hierarchy, there is a factor of class as some people are doing financially better than others. There are also differences between the two genders. Buddhism requires them to cease deity worship but been born and brought up as a Hindu, can they get rid of these habits in a day? Ideological transformation takes a very long time whereas the real standard of the society is bitterly the same. The major problem with conversion is that it is an idealistic solution incapable of coping with material differences in the society. In terms of the ground reality, autobiographies of Dalits showcase them scared to forsake their gods. Some start worshipping buddha along with Hindu gods. And even if they change their gods or dress, can the transformation of the mind happen in a day? Because Ambedkar was so



fired up with the idea of conversion, he did not address issues as such. Conversion was an attempt to gain an identity of pride but it only changes self identification. In society, once a Dalit always a Dalit. And therefore it appears as a mere veil to mask one's caste instead of entirely transforming out of it. But nonetheless, it succeeds in providing a moral framework for the oppressed people who can now take a step out of the discriminatory cage. Ambedkar's rejection of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism to incorporate principles based on reason and inclusivity establishes him as a path-giver as well a saviour under whose guidance can bring up a challenging adaption which can take time but it would lead them to nowhere but a better space.

It can be said that the great religious conversion "theologizes Ambedkar's politics and politicises Buddha's theology." It was no less than a revolution for Dalits whom it introduced to a life beyond the chains of caste. Hinduism continued to thrive across the Indian subcontinent for centuries without paying any heed to the absence of equality for all. Young Ambedkar's publishing endeavours aimed at evoking the oppressed to join the battle-space to fight the derogatory connotation associated with their identity. He also led many movements and gave speeches to claim a life enriched with basic human rights. He remained unfazed by pressures of the invincible Mahatma Gandhi and Indian National Congress even in the moments when their devotees called him anti-national for demanding equality for the Depressed Classes. He actively participated in Conferences and Committees to help the people of his community secure reservations and separate electorates in order to represent themselves. And to finally denounce caste system, he abandons Hinduism for Buddhism. It was not an impulsive choice but a decision which resulted from a twenty year long contemplation. The act of mass conversion was a wonderful spectacle but raised questions regarding being effective in altering their reality. Though the change was challenging to imbibe for those who had spent their lives the Brahmanical way yet it succeeded in providing them a refuge from religious hypocrisy. Edwin Arnold said that "Buddhism is the grandest manifestation of freedom ever proclaimed" and therefore very rightly adopted by Ambedkar to put an end to coercion and exploitation. He placed morality at the centre of his religion and functions through righteousness. One can only look back at his vision of conversion with praise as it simply reconstructed the world.

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