CHAPTER IV
Dr. Ambedkar and Buddhism

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(A). INCLINATION TO BUDDHISM:

There were barely 2,00,000 Buddhists left in India after the separation of Burma in August 1935. Mahabodhi Society, the only Buddhist organization founded by Anagarika Dharmapal for the propagation of Buddhism was lukewarm and apathetic towards conversion of untouchables mainly because it was dominated by upper caste Hindus who were interested only in the study of Buddhist history and philosophy but were not interested in conversion.1

In the last phase of his life, Dr. Ambedkar made a great resolve to raise the banner of Buddhism and bring back to this motherland the Buddha who had suffered an exile for over twelve hundred years. He unfurled the banner, and his people marched.2

He unveiled an image of the Buddha in a newly constructed Buddha Vihara at Dehu Road near Poona. On that occasion he said that the honour of establishing the image of Bhagwan Buddha twelve hundred years after the fall of Buddhism, went to his people. It was a great event, and without doubt it would be recorded in history.

He declared that he would dedicate himself to the propagation of the Buddhist faith in India. He told the gathering of 20,000 men and women that he was writing a book on Buddhism explaining its tenets in simple language to the common man. A year might be needed to complete the book, on its completion he would embrace Buddhism.3

In the early days of December 1954, he went to Rangoon to attend the third Buddhist World Conference. He was moved intellectually, psychologically and spiritually. He felt there that a lot of money was squandered on decoration during celebrations of Buddhist religious festivities. Grandeur had no place in Buddhism. The Burmese and Ceylonese Buddhist should spend that money on the revival and propagation of Buddhism in other countries. Dr. Ambedkar a man of provocative learning, challenged opponents of Buddhism to hold discussions with him, and he was confident that he would defeat all pandits. Buddhism had far reaching effects on Hinduism, and cow protection was a victory of the Buddhist principle of non-violence, he added.4

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2. Life and Mission, D.Keer, Page 481.
3. Ibid, Page 482.
4. Ibid, Page 481.
The year 1955 opened with the news that Ambedkar was going to embrace Buddhism. Ambedkar came out as a champion of Buddhism; he received several invitations from different parts of the country to address Buddhist Institutions, which were stirred at the news of his decision.  

Another announcement made in the early part of the year 1955 by Dr. Ambedkar was regarding the starting of a Buddhist seminary at Bangalore to train preachers propagating the faith in India.  

A talk by Dr. Ambedkar was broadcast in May 1956 from the British Broadcasting Corporation, London, on “Why I like Buddhism and how it is useful to the world in its present circumstances.” “I prefer Buddhism”, he observed “because it gives three principles in combination which no other religion does. Buddhism teaches Prajna (understanding against superstition and supernaturalism), Karma (Love), and Samata (equality). This is what man wants for a good and happy life. Neither god nor soul can save society.”  

In the constitution, he had already achieved several things to that end. He described the provision for the study of Pali made in the constitution, the inscriptions of a Buddhist aphorism on the frontage of the imposing Rastrapati Bhavan in New Delhi, and the acceptance of the Ashoka Chakra by Bharat as her symbol, as his personal achievements. The Govt. of India has declared Buddha Jayanti a holiday mainly due to his effort. He had effected this wonderful change, he proudly stated, without any opposition, solaced and effective was his exposition in parliament. Besides he had established two colleges, one at Bombay and the other at Aurangabad, where about 3400 students were studying and where he could encourage the study of Buddhism. He pointed sadly to the fact that Buddhism had disappeared from the place of its birth.  

Secretary, Mahabodhi Society, Banaras, sent a very carefully worded telegram addressed to Dr. Ambedkar when he came to know about the idea of Dr. Ambedkar.  

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1. Ibid Page 483.  
2. Ibid.  
3. Ibid, Page 490.  
4. Ibid, Page 482.  
5. Revival Of Buddhism In India and Role of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Page 43.
Shocked very much to read your decision to renounce Hindu religion, very sorry to read that the depressed classes should break away completely from Hindu fold. Please reconsider your decision. I see untouchability is being brought to an end by thoughtful sanatanists themselves. But if you still persist in embracing another religion, you with your community are most cordially welcome to embrace Buddhism, which is professed by the greater parts of Asia. Among Buddhists there are no religious or social disabilities. We grant equal status to all converts. There are no caste distinctions among us. We are willing to send workers.¹

Mahabodhi Society at Calcutta had earlier condemned the move to renounce Hinduism in a meeting held at Calcutta but after reconsideration sent the following communication.

“That Dr. Ambedkar be requested to reconsider the step announced by him at conference of Harijans at Nasik”.

In view of the larger interests of the Indian society, as a whole, and that if after such consideration he still finds no reason to alter his decision, he is invited to embrace Buddhism as his religion which guarantees perfect equality of status, both social and religious, to all those who propose to profess it and which has grown out of the soil of his country, represents its highest achievements in toleration, Universality and justice and is least calculated to disturb constructive forces in the social regeneration of India.²

There is no doubt that he will find in Buddhism a complete satisfaction for the rational temper which an educated man develops almost unconsciously and for the religious, civic, social and educational equality whose absence is felt so keenly by a large section of Hindu society.³

To him Buddhism differed from Hinduism. He further observed. “Hinduism believes in God. Buddhism has no God. Hinduism believes in Chaturvarnya and the caste system. Buddhism has no place for the caste system and Chaturvarnya”. He told his followers that his book on Buddhism would be published soon. He had closed all the breaches in the organization of Buddhism and would consolidate it; so the tide of Buddhism would never recede in India.⁴

¹. Ibid, B. Das, Page 44.
². Revival Of Buddhism, B. Das, Page 44.
³. ‘Depressed Classes’ Cronological Documentation, page 60 ‘Also See Revival of Buddhism’, D. Das Page 44.
⁴. Life and Mission, Dr. Keer, Page 44-45.
Mahabodhi Society had never taken any interest in the untouchables nor was any effort made to take Buddhism to common people. The journal published in English reached only a few hundred English people. A close analysis of the documents shows that they suffered from a kind of inhibition, presumable because they got their funds from the Hindu Industrialists, businessmen and bureaucrats. Secondly Hindus Bhadralok of Bengal dominated in the Mahabobhi Society. Thirdly, the Buddhists from the neighboring countries were struggling against British imperialism and they looked towards India for help.

From the literature and activities of Mahabodhi Society it appears they had no understanding of the problems and aspirations of the untouchables even of Bengal. Quite naturally, they considered the upper castes as their friends.

Many Muslim organizations became interested in the conversion of the untouchables to Islam.\(^1\) Christian organizations also raised funds and asked for more Christian missionaries from their respective countries. Hindus had a comparatively easy task to befool the untouchables. Some Hindu organizations reluctantly admitted the untouchable boys in their school and thoroughly brainwashed them. Every Hindu became a missionary and preached against conversion to any other religion. Muslims also opened the doors of Islamia schools to untouchables and gave them concessions.

Dr. Ambedkar remained pre-occupied with political work and deferred the question of conversion. However, with the passage of time he became seriously interested in Buddhism. He struggled for the political and civic rights of the untouchables.\(^2\)

Political leaders of the untouchables got divided into camps, one included people who were serious of getting into legislature and cared little for principles or ideology the other group consisted of people who studied Hinduism and the social and economic system which was responsible for their degradation. The other group became follower of Gandhiji because they thought that staying with the powerful Hindu group and congress would be beneficial.

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2. Ibid, Page 78.
The other group continued to strive for social and religious independence. They believed that with caste system existing there can be no salvation and there can be no unity among the Scheduled Castes, with the abolition of ‘schedule’ and withdrawal of concessions like reservation in legislation which is only a temporary measure, they will once again be reduced to the levels of serfs and slaves.¹

They kept reminding Dr. Ambedkar, their undisputed leader, to start a new religion so that they may have religious independence and become masters of their fate and captains of their souls.²

Dr. Ambedkar did not think it right and proper to start a new religion. He thought that teachings of the Buddha were the best not only for the untouchables but also for the whole country. The more he studied the more convinced he became that Buddhism should be revived and reinstated in the country of its origin. It was a matter of shame that such great religion like the Buddha’s should have no place in the land of its birth. He studied Buddhism, visited Buddhist countries, discussed with the Buddhist scholars in India and abroad and came to the conclusion that Buddhism must be revived to save India and to save humanity. He studied communism, as it was being practiced in the countries, which had thrown away the yoke of capitalism but like many western intellectuals and social thinkers. Dr. Ambedkar also became disillusioned with communism. He believed firmly that Buddhism presented a better alternative but he felt no attraction for the Buddhism of joss sticks, candle burning and meaningless repetition of prayers unaccompanied by the understanding of the practice of the teachings of the Buddha.

While in 1935, he was thinking of conversion of his people to escape the tyranny of Hinduism, in 1950, he was thinking of revival of Buddhism. He was thinking not only of people of India but the people of the whole world, who stood shocked by the disastrous end of the Second World War and were looking within for the failure of religion and for establishing peace by 1950 he had almost decided to embrace Buddhism.³

¹ Ibid, Page 49.
² Ibid.
³ Ibid, Page 50.
EXPECTATIONS OF DR. AMBEDKAR:

Hinduism is the religion of the majority of people in India. Hinduism is also responsible for most of the weakness in Indian character. Among all the religions of world, Hinduism is the only religion, which has rectified and preached inequality. There is a kind of spiritual anarchy in Hinduism. One is free to believe or disbelieve any thing.

One does not cease to be a Hindu unless one chooses to openly renounce Hinduism and embrace some other faith. If untouchability is practiced and people in this country are judged on the basis of birth, it is because of the Varna and caste system of Hindus. A society or country divided into thousands of castes can not remain independent for long. India lost her freedom many times only because of the caste system. Caste system and nationalism, caste system and democracy are incompatible and contradictory.

Most of the present day conflicts in India are the products of caste system on which Hinduism depends for survival. It is difficult for a Hindu to imagine a word without caste. Some enlightened Hindus who love freedom and their country are critical of this abominable system but lack the courage to openly condemn it. Even if they condemn it publicly, they do not give it up. All efforts to abolish caste system have failed so far Baba Saheb Ambedkar was one of those thinkers and social scientists who believed that the only way to abolish caste system and inequality from India is to give an alternative in the form of Buddhism, because it was Buddha who in a practical manner tried to abolish superstition, caste system and untouchability, two thousand and five hundred year ago.

Hindu religious leaders and social reformers were trying to bring about reforms by giving new interpretation of their ancient religious book but these did not convince the fast awakening so called low caste and untouchables of India, with the spread of education and infiltration of western ideas and ideologies members of these classes were questioning the authority of Hindu religious books which had been responsible for keeping them in subjugation, poor, ignorant and virtually slaves of the upper castes. New cults, new sects, and the legions of saints, Gurus and gods could not befool them for long. ¹

¹. Revival Of Buddhism, B. Das Page 51.
Keeping in view the present trends and movements of Hindus and their religion and the aspiration of the untouchables and other oppressed sections of Hindu society, he posed a question about the utility of religion.¹

“There is one question which every religion must answer. What mental and moral relief does it bring to the suppressed and the downtrodden”?²

“If it does not, it is doomed. Does Hinduism give any mental and moral relief to the millions of backward classes and scheduled castes to live under Hinduism, which gives them no promise of mental and moral relief”? Such an expectation would be an utter futility. Hinduism is floating on a volcano. Today it appears to be extinct. But it is not. It will become active once these mighty millions have become conscious of their degradation and that it is largely due to the social philosophy of Hindu religion.³

Religion has played a very constructive role in elevating man but it has played very destructive role also. Ugly face of religion has not been revealed properly. Its history is reeking with the blood of the innocent men, women and children. Religion has obstructed development of science and liberty of man. It has contributed a great deal towards suppression and exploitation of human beings. According to Winwoode Reade, “Religion is a good nurse but a bad mistress”.

“Religion according to Winwoode Reade, is a good nurse but a bad mistress”.⁴

In spite of all weaknesses and evils wrought in the name of religion, Dr. Ambedkar believed in the institution of religion. Law and changes in the economic system are not sufficient to keep the man straight or human. “Society” Dr. Ambedkar wrote, “must have either the sanction of law or the sanction of morality to hold it together without either society is bound to go to pieces”. His concept of religion was however; different from that it is usually believed to be. He did not believe in god nor did he think such a belief is necessary.⁴

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1. Ibid, Page 52.
2. All India Register, 1936 (Vol-I), See Under Khilaft movement.
Religion must be in accord with science. Religion is bound to lose respect and therefore, become the subject of ridicule and thereby not merely lose its force as a governing principle of life but might in course of time disintegrate and lapse if it is to function, must be in "accord with science". In other words, religion if it is to function, must be in "accord with reason which is merely another name for science".

Religion as a code of social morality, must also, stand together another test. It is not enough for religion to consist of a moral code, but its moral code must also recognize the fundamental tenets of liberty, equality and fraternity. Unless a religion recognizes these three fundamental principles of social life, religion will be doomed.

Religion must not sanctify or ennoble poverty. Renunciation of riches by those who have it may be a blessed state. But poverty can never be. To declare poverty to be a blessed state is to pervert Religion to perpetuate vice and crime, to consent to make earth a living hell.¹

After making a deep study of major religions of the world and new trends of Hindu religion, he became convinced that the only religion, which can elevate man and also liberate him from the superstitions was the Dhamma as preached by the Buddha.²

With a view to studying how Buddhism was being practiced, Dr. Ambedkar visited Sri Lanka and Burma. He discussed the question of revival of Buddhism with prominent Buddhist scholars and venerable Bhikkus from Asian countries and Europe visited him and exchanged their ideas in regard to revival of Buddhism.

Inspite of his failing health he devoted considerable time to the study of Buddhist interest. During his visit to Burma he stayed with Dr. R.L. Soni a Punjabi domiciled in Burma and found that Buddhist leader in Burma were keen on strengthening Buddhism. On his return he submitted a memorandum to Buddha Saran of Burma for consideration. In this memorandum to the Attorney General of Burma who like Honourable U.Nu, the Prime Minister of Burma was an active Buddhist leader of Burma.³

². Revival of Buddhism, B. Das, Page 53.
³. Ibid, Page 54.
Dr. Ambedkar held that Buddhism in India had vanished yet the Buddha was held in great veneration in India. In his own words, "In India Buddhism may be a withered plant but no one can say that it is dead at the roots. He (Buddha) is regarded by the Hindus as "Avatar" of Vishnu. In India we do not have to restore veneration for a new prophet. All that we have to do is to bring back his religion".

India was the country, which was the most suited to start the revival work. He also mentioned about the sections, which were most likely to respond immediately.

There are sections among the Hindus who are eager to renounce Hinduism and go over to Buddhism. Such are the untouchables and the backward classes. They are against Hinduism because of its doctrine of graded inequality. In the present stage of their intellectual awakening these classes are up in arms against Hinduism. Now is the time to take advantage of their discontent.¹

Anticipating the hesitation in converting the ‘Lower classes’ to Buddhism, which Christians and communists had been having in their minds, Dr. Ambedkar wrote; “There should be no hesitation in launching the movement on the ground that the majority of the people entering Buddhism in its early stages will be coming from lower classes. The sasana council must not make the mistakes which the Christian missionaries in India make. The Christian missionaries began by attempting to convert the Brahmins. Their strategy was that if the Brahmins could be converted first the conversion of the rest of the Hindus could not be difficult. For they argued that if the Brahmins have accepted Christianity, why don’t you? They are the heads of your religion”.

This strategy of the missionaries proved fatal to Christians. Why should Brahmins change their religion? They had all advantages under Hinduism. The Christian missionaries in India realized their mistake and turned their attention to the untouchable after wasting hundreds of years in effort to convert the Brahmins.

By the time they turned to the untouchables the spirit of nationalism had grown up and every thing alien, including Christianity was regarded as inimical to the country.

The result was that Christian missionaries could convert very few untouchables. The Christian population is surprisingly small notwithstanding the missionary efforts extending over three hundred years. They might have converted the whole of untouchables and the backward classes if they had begun with them first.

He suggested the following preliminary steps for the revival of Buddhism in India. He had mentioned these in his article on Buddhism which was published in the Vaisakh number of the ‘Mahabodhi’ published by Mahabodhi Society from Calcutta in 1950. He elaborated those points in this memorandum.

The preparation of a Buddhist Gospel which would be a constant companion of the convert. The want of a small Gospel containing the teachings of the Buddha is a great handicap in the propagation of Buddhism. The commoners cannot be expected to read the seventy-three volumes of the Pali canon.

Christianity has great advantages over Buddhism in having the message of Christ contained in a small booklet the ‘Bible’. This handicap in the way of the propagation of Buddhism must be removed. In regard to the preparation of Buddha’s Gospel, care must be taken to emphasize the social and moral teachings of the Buddha. I have to emphasize this. What is being emphasized is ‘Meditation’, ‘Contemplation’ and ‘Abhidhamma’. This way of presenting Buddhism to Indians would be fatal to our cause.

The introduction of a ceremony like Baptism in Christianity for the laity. There is really no ceremony of conversion i.e. for becoming a lay disciple of the Buddha. Whatever ceremony of conversion i.e. for becoming a lay disciple of the Buddha. Whatever ceremony of conversion there is, is for becoming a Bhikkhu, for entering into the Sangha. Among the Christians there are two-ceremonies (I) for Baptism showing acceptance of Christianity and (II) for ordination i.e. becoming a priest. In Buddhism there is no ceremony like ‘Baptism’. This is the main reason why people after becoming Buddhists slip out of Buddhism.¹

¹ Memorandum submitted to Buddha Sharan of Burma, Rangoon from the Personal Collection of Mr. N.C. Rattu, Personal Secretary of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.
The appointment of a number of lay preachers who could go about and preach Buddhism and see how far they are following Buddha's Dhamma. The lay-preachers must be paid and secondly they may be married persons. In the beginning they may be part time workers.

The establishment of a Buddhist Religious Seminary where persons who wish to become preachers could be taught Buddhism and also comparative study of other religions.

The introduction of congregational worship in the Vihara every Sunday followed by a sermon. Besides these suggestions Dr. Ambedkar also made the following proposals:-

(I) Building big temples and Viharas in the four important towns:
(a) Madras (b) Bombay (c) Nagpur (d) Delhi.

(II) Establishment of High Schools and Colleges in these cities.

(III) Inviting essays on Buddhist topics and giving prizes to the first three sufficient in value so as to attract people to make their best efforts to study Buddhist literature. The essay should be open to all, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, men as well as women. This is the best way of making people interested in the study of Buddhism.

Temples should be so big as to create the impression that something big is really happening. High schools and Colleges are necessary adjuncts. They are intended to create the Buddhist atmosphere among younger men. Besides they will not only pave their way but bring a surplus which could be used for other missionary work. It would be remembered that most of the Christian missions find funds for financing their activities from the surplus revenue which is yielded by the schools and college they run.¹

Dr. Ambedkar was a serious student of history and culture of India. He knew Hindu mind very well and also how Brahmins had corrupted and destroyed everything noble and constructive by converting it to serve their class and their interests. Forewarning about the dangers to Buddhism he wrote :-

¹ Memorandum submitted to Buddha Saran of Burma, Rangoon from the Personal collection of Mr. N.C. Rattu, for the Personal Collection of Uttar Pradesh.
The danger to Buddhism from Islam no longer exists. But danger from Brahmanism exists. It will be its toughest opponent. A Brahmin will remain Brahmin, no matter what colour he assumes or what party he joins. That is because Brahmins want to maintain the system of graded social inequality. For it is this graded inequality which has raised the Brahmins above all and to be on the top of every body. Buddhism believes in equality. Buddhism strikes at every root of their prestige and power. That is why the Brahmins hate it. It is quite possible they may use their power to sabotage it or misdirect it. The precaution to exclude them from positions of power at least in the early stages of our movement is, therefore very necessary.¹

2500⁰ anniversary of Buddha was being celebrated in 1956. Dr. Ambedkar decided to have conversion by the end the missionary work he had written a ‘concise and compact’ book on ‘Buddhism and also founded a society of lay-preachers under the name of Baudh Mahajan Sabha’ which was later on renamed ‘Buddhist Society of India’. He wrote a prayer book beginning with “Nammo Tass Bhagvato Arhato Samma Sambudhassaye” and ending with “Om Mani Padmni Hom”. He did not write a book on rituals and ceremonies because he believed these had little to do with religion. These grow out of the social needs and must be in accord with law. About marriage however, he prescribed a simple ceremony in a letter addressed to a correspondent in Bombay.²

There can be no revival without followers. There can be no followers without a leader. Leader must command respect and loyalty of people. People respect a leader if they have faith in the leader and leader has the capacity to lead them to the destination to fulfill their hopes, aspirations and dreams.

It is easy for a political leader to have large following. People are motivated by the desire to have share in the prestige, power and economic benefits. In the case of religious leaders, people follow them if they can work miracles and relieve them from the miseries. Buddha as a religious leader, unlike other religious leaders who followed him, did not work miracles. On the country he castigated the Bhikkhus who exhibited supernatural power to impress people.

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¹. Ibid.
². Revival of Buddhism, B. Das, Page 59.
Dr. Ambedkar did not promise power, prestige or material benefits. Yet people had faith in him because of his sincerity and devotion to the glorious achievements for the despised and oppressed people of India. Nobody had ever tried to liberate them. Nobody had achieved for them what Dr. Ambedkar within a short span of his life had achieved. He had given them hope, he had given them dignity, he had given them courage to struggle for equality, liberty and justice and shown the right path.

Apartheid can be abolished but it would be difficult to abolish untouchability and caste system without destroying or replacing Hinduism by a better creed based on equality, liberty and fraternity.

Who are the untouchables and who made them untouchables are matters, which have been properly researched. Barring the book written by Dr. Ambedkar under the title “Who are the untouchables” who were they and why they became untouchables.” No attempt has been made to investigate into the origin of untouchability. One theory is that after the fall of Buddhism and emergence of Neohindusim with the worship of Rama and Krishna or other incarnations of Vishnu, those who continued to follow Buddhism were reduced to the level of segregated people and condemned to live as ‘untouchables’. Whatever the facts, one thing is noticeable in India that wherever Buddhism was at its strongest, there we find the largest number of untouchables. Many of the religious beliefs customs and rituals similar to the untouchables appear to have link with popular Buddhism of old.¹

October 14, 1956, the day appointed for Ambedkar’s going over to Buddhism was fast approaching. His devoted lieutenants often anxiously discussed the matter with him. In the first week of August, Ambedkar had a talk with Shankaranand Shastri one of his lieutenants. He told him that he would hold his conversion ceremony at Bombay, Sarnath or Nagpur.

He himself preferred Nagpur, which was a historic town where the Buddhist Nagas flourished in ancient times. He would set the wheels of Buddhas Dhamma in motion once again, spreading the message of his master to all the corner of the world. A disciple expresses his fear to Ambedkar that if his follower did not follow him enbloc, it would be a shock, smashing and damaging.

¹ Revival Of Buddhism, B. Das, Page-60.
The leader replied gravely that he had thought over the problems for a pretty long time and had somehow been deferring the issue of conversion. Day by day, he said with a sigh, his health was sinking fast and he thought he was approaching his end. So this time he would not defer his conversion any longer. Those who wished to join him were most welcome; those who did not favour conversion were free to go anywhere they liked.

Accordingly he called W.M. Godbole to Delhi. Godbole was Secretary of the Bhartiya Buddha Jana Samiti established not long earlier by Ambedkar himself. Ambedkar discussed with him, the arrangement to be made at Nagpur; for he wanted to make the ceremony a grand success. A general appeal to the depressed class people was issued by the B.B.J Samiti, directing them to come in large numbers dressed in white, for the initiating ceremony.

On September 23, Ambedkar issued a press note announcing that his conversion in Buddhism would take at Nagpur on the Dashehara day, October 14, 1956 between 9 and 11 a.m.¹

Dr. Ambedkar invited Rev. Bhikkhu Chandramani; of Kushinara, Gorakhpur District, to Nagpur, to initiate him into Buddhism on October 14. "It is our great wish", he added, "that you should officiate at the ceremony. You being oldest monk in India we think it would be appropriate to have the ceremony performed by you". He expressed his desire to provide the priest with an air or train passage, and added that he would send someone to bring him from Kushinara to Nagpur.²

Describing the near at hand conversion, the Maha Bodhi, the famous Buddhist Journal in India, excited with joy, observed "When on the coming Vijaya Dashmi day the lion hearted leader and his followers make that momentous step forward, a threefold shout of 'Sadhu!!!' will surely rise from every part of the Buddhist world and would be taken up by the Devas celestial beings and echoed from heaven to heaven until finally it reaches the foot of the throne of the Enlightenment, and there who labour in the heat of the day in the field of Buddhist revival in India, hearing that shout, will pause for a moment in their work and know, with joy in their work and know, with joy in their hearts that at last the tide has turned". Quite a Hindu way of expressing heavenly joy.³

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¹ Life and Mission, D. Keer, Page-496.
² Ibid, Page-497.
³ Ibid.
For a week prior to the appointment day thousands of men, women and children of the Depressed classes, especially the Mahars, had been pouring in Nagpur from the Marathi-speaking areas of Central Provinces and atmosphere was surcharged with Buddhist pioussness. Nagpur atmosphere was surcharged with Buddhist pioussness. Nagpur sanctified in the olden times by the residence of Nagarjun, the great scholar leader of Buddhism, was not transferred into a holy place of great significance, historical slogans “Baba Saheb gives a clarion call, embrace Buddhism all”. “Move heaven and earth and switch over to Buddhism”.

On the evening of October 13, Dr. Ambedkar held a press conference. He told newsmen that his Buddhism would cling to the tenets of the faith as preached by Lord Buddha himself, without involving his people in differences which had arisen on account of Hinayana and Mahayana.

His Buddhism would be a sort of Neo-Buddhism or Navayana. When asked why he was embracing Buddhism, he said angrily. “Why cannot you ask this question to your self and to your forefeathers as to why I am getting out of the Hindu fold and embracing Buddhism?” He asked newsmen why they wanted his men to remain Harijans to enjoy only such ‘benefits’ as those of reservation.

He asked them whether the Brahmins were prepared to be untouchables to enjoy these privileges. He said that they were making efforts to reach manhood. He also declared that he had once told Mahatma Gandhi that though he differed from him on the issue of untouchability, yet he would choose only the least harmful way for the country. And that was the greatest benefit he conferred on the country by embracing Buddhism; for Buddhism is a part and parcel of Indian Culture. He took care that his conversion should not harm the tradition of the culture and history of this land. He practiced with a flow in his eyes that in the next ten or fifteen years the wave of mass conversion would spread all over the country, and India would become a Buddhist country.

On the night of October 13, there was some discussion between Ambedkar and some of his chosen lieutenants as to whether their conversions could not be put off till after the coming general elections. There was a division of opinion and Ambedkar was terribly upset. He threatened them with dire consequences if they prevaricated and faltered. They left Dr. Ambedkar.

C. THE GREAT CONVERSION:

On the morning of October 14, 1956 Ambedkar woke up early. Since early morning a sea of humanity had been flowing towards the Deeksha Bhum. The skies were filled with resounding ‘jais’ to Buddha and Baba Saheb. The huge crowds enthusiastically cheered their saviour as he reaches the pandal and was taken up on the dais. On the dais there stood on a table a bronze statue of the Buddha flanked by two tigers and incense burning before it. Sitting on the dais were D. Valisinha, Ven. M. Sangharatna Thera, Ven. H. Sadda Tissa Thera and Ven. Pannanand Thera.

The ceremony commenced with a Marathi song sung by a lady in praise of Dr. Ambedkar. The vast humanity of over three lakhs of men and women from all parts of the state watched the ceremony eagerly as the eighty three year old Mahasthavir Chandramani of Kushinara and his four saffron robed Bhikkhus administered in Pali to Dr. Ambedkar and his wife, who were both bowing before the image of Buddha, the three sarans under Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha and Panchsheel of five precepts of abstention from killing, stealing, telling lies, wrongful sex life, and drinks. They repeated the Pali mantras in Marathi. Then they bowed down their offerings of white lotuses before it. With this Ambedkar’s entry into the Buddhistic fold was announced and the vast concourse gave full-throated cries of ‘Baba Saheb Ambedkar ki Jay’ and ‘Bhagwan Buddha ki Jai’.

On his conversion, Ambedkar was profusely garlanded by his closest devotees. D. Valisinha presented Dr. Ambedkar and Mrs. Savita Ambedkar with an image of Lord Buddha. Dr. Ambedkar then declared; “By discarding my ancient religion which stood for inequality and oppression today, I am reborn. I have no faith in the Philosophy of incarnation and it is wrong and mischievous to say that Buddha was an incarnation of Vishnu. I am no more a devotee of any Hindu god or goddess. I will not perform Shraddha. I will strictly follow the eightfold path of Buddha. Buddhism is a true religion and I will lead a life guided by the three principles of knowledge, right path and compassion”.

1. Life and Mission, D. Keer, Page 500
He prescribed 22 oaths so that there may be complete severance of bonds with Hinduism. Superstition must have no place in Dhamma. These twenty two oaths read as under:

(1) I shall have no faith in Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh nor shall I worship them.
(2) I shall have no faith in Rama and Krishna who are believed to be incarnation of God nor shall I worship them.
(3) I shall have no faith in ‘Gouri’, ‘Ganpathi’ and other gods and goddesses of Hindus nor shall I worship them.
(4) I do not believe in the incarnation of God.
(5) I shall not act in a manner violating the principle and teachings of the Buddha.
(6) I do not and shall not believe that Lord Buddha was the incarnation of Vishnu. I believe this to be sheer madness and false propaganda.
(7) I shall not perform ‘SHRADHA’ nor shall I give ‘Pind Dan’.
(8) I shall not allow any ceremonies to be performed by Brahmins.
(9) I shall believe in the equality of man.
(10) I shall endeavour to establish equality.
(11) I shall follow the noble eightfold path of the Buddha.
(12) I shall follow the ‘Paramitas’ prescribed by the Buddha.
(13) I shall have compassion and loving kindness for all living beings and protect them.
(14) I shall not steal.
(15) I shall not tell lies.
(16) I shall not commit carnal sins.
(17) I shall not take intoxicants like liquor, drugs etc.
(18) I shall endeavour to follow the noble eightfold path and practice compassion and living kindness in everyday life.
(19) I renounce Hinduism which is harmful for humanity and impedes the advancement and development of humanity because it is based on inequality, and adopt Buddhism as my religion.
(20) I firmly believe that the Dhamma of the Buddha is the only true religion.
(21) I believe that I am having a re-birth.
(22) I solemnly declare and affirm that I shall hereafter lead my life according to the principles and teachings of the Buddha and his Dhamma.

Once or twice, when he repeated the pledges to renounce the worship of the god and when he declared, "I renounce Hinduism", the great leader seemed deeply moved his voice choked visibly as he spoke. These pledges, framed by himself, were twenty two. He denounced Hinduism, its customs and traditions and declared that from that moment onwards he would strive for the spread of equality among human beings.

Now a Buddhist, Dr. Ambedkar calls upon those who wanted to embrace Buddhism to stand up. The entire gathering rose up and he administered the three refuges and precepts and different pledges to the vast gathering. They repeated in loud and joyous tones the precepts and pledges. Nearly three lakhs of his followers embraced Buddhism, and to use his own analogy of shepherd, he flocked them into Buddhism.\(^2\)

The next day Ambedkar initiated another vast crowd of his followers into Buddhism at the same place and said that the scheduled castes would not lose their rights with the change of faith. The privileges enjoyed by the scheduled castes under the constitution, he observed were the fruits of his labour, and he was capable of retaining them for his people. He reminded them of his vow taken in 1935 that "even though I am a Hindu born, I will not die a Hindu". He had fulfilled his vow and had divine satisfaction that he had come at last out of the hell of Hinduism. He did not believe in hurried action and therefore he took more than twenty years to think and arrive at a mature decision.\(^3\)

Referring to Marx's Philosophy, Dr. Ambedkar observed "Man cannot live by bread alone. He has a mind which needs food for thought. Religion instils hope in man and drives him to activity. Hindu religion has watered down the enthusiasm of the downtrodden. So I found it necessary to change my faith and embrace Buddhism". Buddhism was independent of time and place. He would have no truck with a country whose people preferred bread to culture of the mind. If Hinduism had given the scheduled castes freedom of weapons, the country would not have been enslaved at any time he added.\(^4\)

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4. Ibid.
He then seriously warned his people that a great responsibility had fallen on their shoulders in connection with the upholding of Buddhism.¹

Depicting the conversion as the most significant development during the present century, the Hitawad, Nagpur, said: “Paradoxically enough, Dr. Ambedkar a highly rationalistic and scientific thinker stands in line with Emperor Ashok and others of historic memory, as the high prophet of Buddhist faith”. It may be noted here that a leaflet issued on this occasion by Mahasthavir Chandramani and other Bhikkhus said that Hinduism and Buddhism are branches of the same tree.²

According to the Buddhist view, the great conversion constituted a new chapter in the history of modern India. “Conversion was not a happy term to describe the changes because force and temptation are associated with conversion”, observed a Buddhist writer. It was a self conversion and not conversion that had come to mean giving up one’s own faith and embracing something foreign, he added. Other Buddhists said that the Dhamma Chakra was set revolving by the intrepid leader, and it was the greatest religious revolution which India has witnessed in Modern Times.³

He wanted to do more for his country, but in the existing set up, he observed it was difficult to maintain one’s interest in it affairs when the people were not prepared to give a hearing to any view which did not agree with that of the Prime Minister.

“It is a sin”, he sighed, “to take birth in such a country whose people are so prejudiced. Anyhow I have done a lot in spite of the words of abuse hurled at me from all sides. I will continue to do so till my death”. So saying, he burst into tears. “Tell my people”, he said one day to Rattu, his honorary private secretary, “Whatever I have done, I have been able to do after passing through crushing miseries and endless troubles all my life and fighting with my opponents. With great difficulty I have brought this caravan where it is seen today. Let the caravan march on despite the hurdles that may come in its way. If my lieutenants are not able to take the caravan ahead they should leave it there but in no circumstances should leave the caravan to go back. This is the message to my people”.⁴

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1. Ibid.
2. Ibid, Page 503.
Hindus did not take kindly the mass conversion of untouchables to Buddhism. Some newspaper called it a 'Political Stunt' of Ambedkar.\(^1\)

In spite of numerous difficulties Buddhism is making progress in India. Buddhist Society of India founded by Dr. Ambedkar had its branches in many parts of India.\(^2\)

In the early part of the year 1956, the great book on the Buddha and Buddhism was almost completed. Ambedkar had started writing the book in November, 1951. Along with this book he had started writing two other books, Revolution and Counter Revolution in India and Buddha and Karl Marx, for a proper understanding of his main work. Up to March 1956 Buddha and Karl Marx, was incomplete. It needed one more chapter and the other book requires some more chapters to bring out its full significance.\(^3\)

In February 1956 two new chapters were added to the Buddha and his Dhamma; There is no God; There is no soul.\(^4\)

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1. Life and Mission, D. Keer, Page 494
2. Revival Of Buddhism in India and Role of Dr. Baba Sahed Ambedkar, Bhagwan Das, .
3. Ibid. Page 68.
4. Ibid.