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

Ambedkar considered the foundations of religion to be essential to life and practices of society. According to him, religion was a part of one's "social inheritance". He wanted religion, but he did not want hypocrisy in the name of religion. Religion, to him, was the driving force for human activity. He remarked, "Man cannot live by bread alone. He had a mind which need food for the thought." Religion instills hope in Man and drives him to activity. He considered the foundation of religion to be essential to
life and practices of society. He firmly believed in religion. So he was not against religion.

According to Ambedkar, religion must be judged by social standards, based on social ethics. He linked religion with the social being of the people. He remarked, “The religion which discriminates between two followers is partial and the religion which treats crores of its adherents worse than dogs and criminals and inflicts upon them insufferable disabilities is no religion at all.” He wanted to have a religion in the sense of ‘spiritual principles’ truly ‘universal’ applicable to all times, to all countries and to all races. He treated Hinduism as a “a mass of sacrificial, societal, political and sanitary rules and regulations; all mixed up.”

Ambedkar has given four characteristics of religion (1) Religion in the sense of morality, must, therefore, remain the governing principle in every society, (2) Religion, if it is to function, must be in accord with reason which is merely another name for science. (3) Its moral code must recognize the fundamental tenets of liberty, equality and fraternity. Unless a religion recognizes these three fundamental principles of social life, religion will be doomed. (4) Religion must not sanctify or ennoble poverty. According to him, “What is called religion by Hindus is nothing but a multitude of commands and prohibitions.” He has enumerated the evils of Hindu religion as follows: (1) It has deprived moral life of freedom; (2) It has only conformity to commands; (3) The laws are inequitous in that they are not the same for one class as for another. This code had the finality. He
concluded that this religion must be destroyed and there was nothing irreligious in working for the destruction of such a religion.\footnote{Ambedkar wanted a change from a ‘religion of rules’ to a religion of principles’, a change required before it could be a ‘true religion’. Among his requirements were “(1) one standard book of Hindu religion; (2) no hereditary priesthood, but an examination system open to all; (3) state sanads (permits) required for priests; (4) a limit by law on the number of priests; (5) state supervision of the priests’ morals, beliefs and worship.”\footnote{Ambedkar was inclined towards Buddhism openly from May 1956. D.Valinsinha, General Secretary of the Maha Bodhi Society of India,}}

Ambedkar’s journey to Buddhism can be traced during a span of about forty years. At the age of sixteen Keluskar gave him a copy of the life of Gautam Buddha. In the 30 years upto 1945 he had bitter experiences of caste Hindus, and he tried his utmost to have separate electorates—an attempt to isolate Scheduled Castes completely from Hindus. In 1945 he attended a Buddhist conference. On 20 June 1946, on behalf of People’s Education Society, he started one college and named it Siddharth College. In 1948, he wrote a foreword to—L.Narasu’s book —‘The Essence of Buddhism’. In 1950, he took part in the first Modern Buddhist procession in Delhi. In December 1954, he took part in the Third World Federation of Buddhists. It is said that there he made up his mind to embrace Buddhism. Ambedkar was inclined towards Buddhism openly from May 1956. D.Valinsinha, General Secretary of the Maha Bodhi Society of India,
Calcutta, extended hearty congratulations to Ambedkar on his decision to embrace Buddhism in May 1956. He observed that Ambedkar's name would go down in history as one of the greatest benefactors of humanity. If six crores of people in India, he concluded, accepted Buddhism, it would bring new life to the country and enable her to progress very rapidly. On 24 May 1956 he declared on the day of Buddha Jayanti celebrations at Nare Park in Bombay that he would embrace Buddhism in October 1956. On 23 September 1956, he issued a press note announcing that his conversion to Buddhism would take place at Nagpur on the Dassara day, 14 October 1956 between 9 and 11 a.m. He himself preferred Nagapur which was a historic town where the Buddhist Nagas flourished in ancient times.

D.C.Ahir claimed that due to Ambedkar's influence as the architect of India's Constitution the Asoka Chakra (the wheel of law) was put on the flag of India, and the Lions from the Asokan pillar at Sarnath were adopted as the National Emblem.  

A question was raised by many critics when Ambedkar resolved to renounce Hinduism. Why had he waited for a long period of twenty years? It is said that he deliberately waited up to the 2500th birthday of Buddha. B.S.Murthy answered this question. He remarked, "The only answer seems to be that he dearly loved all that was best in Hinduism".

The insulting treatment at the hands of the Hindus; the denial of Sanskrit and Vedic learning; his experiences in Baroda and in the Bombay Bar—all these convinced him that the untouchables would never receive just
treatment in Hindu Dharma and Hindu Society. He was sure that individual and group mobility were difficult within the Hindu social system for the untouchables. He was aware that compassion, equality and freedom were not to be found in Hindu religion. He rejected renunciation. He was attracted towards Buddhism because of its moral basis of equality, justice and wide basis of humanitarianism. Srinivasan, Jagjivan Ram and M.C. Rajah rejected the idea of conversion.

In the All Bombay District Mahar Conference, 30-31 May 1936, Ambedkar characterized the problem of untouchability as a problem of class strife. It was a strife between two societies; the caste Hindus and the untouchables. He thought that to remain in Hinduism and attempt to abolish caste system was like sweetening poison. For this, he emphasized to look for power from some source outside the Hindu fold.

**DHAMMA AS RELIGION**

Ambedkar regarded Dhamma as religion. He observed, "Religion is personal, contrary to this, Dhamma is social." He described Dhamma as righteousness, right relations between man and man in all spheres of life. The Buddhist way of life aimed at the moral regeneration and social emancipation of all human beings. According to him, there were only four preceptors—Shri Krishna, Buddha, Christ and Mohammed. Buddha appealed to him most as he always preached that his disciples should not
obey his commands but should follow the dictates of their conscience. There is no god in Buddhism, but the place of god is taken by morality.

The merits of Buddhist philosophy are given as follows:— (a) Buddhism demands living existence and a life divine attainable here and now—and not after death. (b) It is a realism—never an idealism. (c) It upholds liberty, equality, truth and justice—it pours on humanity love and peace. (d) It is dynamic, scientific and all-embracing. (e) Its explanation of life and its meaning and purpose of birth and its nature, of death and its aftermath is very clear, intelligible and logical. (f) Above all, man is the centre of its study and examination, not anything outside him. On the contrary, the static nature of Hindu Dharma and society was emphasized as below: (a) Hindu Society is as it was in B.C. with trivial modifications. (b) Untouchability is recognized by the Hindu religion; it is deeply rooted in Hindu Society. (c) Caste is the corner-stone to the arch of Hinduism.

According to Ambedkar, Hinduism and Buddhism differed in three vital aspects. In Hindu religion, there is Ishwar (God), Atma (soul), and Varna system; in Buddhism, there is no Ishwar, soul and caste or Varna system. Ambedkar was always of the view that social and human reconstruction needed a religious basis. In a speech on the British Broadcasting Corporation he outlined his preference of Buddhism to Hinduism. He preferred Buddhism because it gave three principles in combination which no other religion gave. Buddhism teaches Prajna (understanding against superstition and supernaturalism), Karuna (love), and Samata (equality).
He preferred Buddhism because like Christianity it affords hope to the down-trodden.\textsuperscript{14}

According to him, Buddhism was a true religion because it led to a life guided by the three principles of knowledge, right path and compassion. He remarked, “Buddhism is a part and parcel of Bharatiya Culture. I have taken care that my conversion will not harm the tradition of the culture and history of this land.”\textsuperscript{15} He said in an interview on 13 October 1956 at Nagpur that he would not remain a member of the S.C.F., after conversion to Buddhism. There were two mottos before him—“Buddham Sarnam Gachame” Means ‘I am surrendering myself to the person possessed of knowledge’; and the other is “Sangam Sarnam Gachame” ‘I am surrendering myself to Sanghs—Guilds. Sangh means social life; to him Buddha was a great socialist of his times. He was a rationalist and he rooted out the monopoly of Brahmins.\textsuperscript{16}

On the morning of October 14, 1956, Ambedkar woke up early. He asked Rattu (Personal Secretary of Ambedkar) to arrange for a hot bath and then to make sure that arrangements at the pandal were perfect. Rattu made inquiries and returned.

Since early morning a sea of humanity had been flowing towards the Deeksha Bhoomi. The sweepers had swept the street leading to it at day-break as they deemed it their fortune to sweep a street along which their savior was to pass. The skies were filled with the resounding ‘jais’ to Buddha and Babasahed.
Dressed in silk white dhoti and white coat, Dr. Ambedkar left the hotel at eight-thirty in the morning in a car with Rattu and his wife Mrs. Savita Ambedkar. She also had put on a white saree. By now all the arrangements proved inadequate and collapsed. The huge crowds enthusiastically cheered their saviour as he reached the pandal and was taken up on the dais. He stood on the dais with a staff in one hand and the other hand on the shoulders of Rattu. There was thunderous applause. It was now a quarter past nine in the morning. Cameramen were busy taking photographs; newsmen writing reports. On the dais there stood on a table a bronze statuette of the Buddha flanked by two tigers and incense burning before it. Sitting on the dais were D. Valisinha, Ven. M. Sanghratna 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 gathering stood up for a minute and observed silence in memory of the death anniversary of Dr. Ambedkar’s father. Then the actual ceremony began. Scores of photographers rushed towards the dais. 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 Mahasthhaveer Chandramani of Kishinara and his four saffron-robbed 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 drink. They repeated the
Pali mantras in Marathi. Then they bowed down thrice with clasped hands before the Buddha statuette and made 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 ‘Babasaheb Ambedkar ki jay’ and ‘Bhagwan Buddha ki jay’. The whole ceremony was filmed. It was now a quarter to ten in the morning.

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.”

Once or twice, when he repeated the pledges to renounce the worship of the Hindu 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 in number. 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 called upon those who wanted to embrace Buddhism to stand up. The entire gathering rose up, and he administered the three refuges and five 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 shepherded, he flocked them into Buddhism. He had always taunted both Christians and non-Christians, saying that to them religion was a matter of inheritance. They inherited religion along with their father’s property. In fact, few religious people have studied comparative religion and hardly any have attained belief as a result of such a study. Among those who embraced Buddhism with Dr. Ambedkar, were Dr. M.B. Niyogi, former Chief Justice of the Nagpur High Court, and Dr. Ambedkar’s leading Maharashtrian lieutenants. Dr. Niyogi, however, said that denunciation of Hinduism as was done by Dr. Ambedkar while embracing Buddhism had no place in the original Buddhist rituals. The ceremony was over by ten to eleven in the morning.

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 Schedules 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. He had the satisfaction of having accomplished a great deed in establishing the revival of Buddhism in India.

**BUDDHA VERSUS MARX**

In a meeting which accorded reception in honour of Indo-Japanese Cultural Association, Ambedkar said that the present generation or future generations would have ultimately to choose between the gospel of Buddha and the gospel of Karl Marx. He added that if Buddhist gospel was not adopted, the history of conflict in Europe would be repeated in Asia. Buddha said, "There is Dukkha (sorrow) in the world". He did not use the word ‘exploitation; but he did lay the foundation of his religion on what he called ‘Dukkha’. The word ‘Dukkha’ has been used by Buddha in the sense of property. Buddha said that no monk should have private property. Marx said that in order to prevent exploitation, the state must own the instruments of production.

While talking on the British Broadcasting Corporation London, in May 1956, Ambedkar said, “Buddhism gives three principles in combination which no other religion does. It teaches Prajna (Understanding) as against superstition; Karuna (love) and Samata (Equality). He claimed that Buddhism was a complete answer to Karl Marx. According to him, the Buddhist way to abolish sorrow was safe and it was the only way to save
itself from Marxism.\textsuperscript{18} He said that to spread Buddhism was to serve mankind.

Ambedkar delivered a speech at the 4\textsuperscript{th} Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists at Kathmandu on 20 November 1956. It was presided by King Mahendra of Nepal. He emphasised that Buddhism could survive only when it could be a substitute for Communism. He said that communist system is based on force; on the other hand in Buddhism he found a democratic system. According to him, Buddha’s way was safest and soundest. He remarked that 90 per cent of Christianity is copied from Buddhism both in substance and in form. At the end of his speech he warned not to be allured by Communist successes. Ambedkar declared to the world that he found Buddhism the greatest of all religions, as it was not merely a religion but a great social doctrine.\textsuperscript{19}

Ambedkar was conscious that the major task is to alter the social structure. He said,“if the social structure were not altered, the present system was likely to collapse pretty soon” and added that “the alternative, if democracy did not work in India, was something of communism.”\textsuperscript{20}

\textbf{CRITICISM}

The religious conversion brought about by Ambedkar on a mass scale was an unprecedented event in the history of India. He visualized that religious conversion was essential to rouse the rational consciousness of man against religious hypocrisy and dishonesty. It was a revolt against the
suppression and enslavement of humanity. It was mobilized and culminated in the Buddhist movement. Buddhism was a revolution. It was as great a revolution as the French Revolution. Though it began as a religious revolution, it became a social and political revolution. It was a liberating force.

Ambedkar's conversion movement has not yet completed five decades. Its appreciation and evaluation is and will be echoed and re-echoed in the social atmosphere of India.

One important point was that the Buddhist conversion released him from his place in the Hindu hierarchy, and from his point of view, gave him a new identity although it did not win this admission from the caste Hindus. S.Kharat remarked "the aim of conversion is not economic but psychological". The untouchables began to think that they had a separate identity. Faith in Ambedkar and spontaneity were the two factors that contributed to the growth of the conversion movement. According to Nehru, 'Buddha functioned to some extent as a social revolutionary.'21 This appealed to the untouchables most.

According to Issacs, 'Ambedkar's choice of Buddhism was, in essence, a compromise with his sense of nationality'. He used to say "I belong to this nation-India. I am an Indian."22 He thought that Buddhism was indigenous. He had full faith in the integrity and oneness of India. He said that by conversion he has taken care not to bring any harm to the Indian culture and Indian historical traditions. Buddhism is purely Indian
and Gautam Buddha is upholder of liberty not only of India but of the whole world. Hindus also shared in common the cultural heritage of Buddhism.  

The posing of the question that Buddha can be an alternative to Marx is out of question; because those two seers have outlined their philosophy in different times. Marxism bases its theories on the materialist conception of the world, and from this stand point, it examines the world. Marxist view is essentially scientifically drawn from reality. Marx puts forth the rules of social transformation; and he emphasised materialist conception of history. The question of violence or non-violence is irrelevant. Marx insisted on the transformation of society, but did not insist on violence.

Ambedkar attacked Marxism and emphasised Buddhism; but his humanistic approach towards the problem of conversion was invalidated by his wrong approach towards Maxism. To facilitate conversion to Buddhism he invented his theory that untouchables were once Buddhists. His conversion went counter to his previous thought that the problem of untouchables was the problem of class war. He did not explain how conversion would bestow upon untouchables the freedom from social bondage, economic advancement and progress. This is regarded as a reactionary step; because his approach to Marxism was wrong. His solution of the problem seemed like a man who first wrote the answer and to justify it outlined the theory afterwards.
Zeliot has put the problem bluntly. She emphasised the point that “Ambedkar’s embracing of a new religion, was meant to act as bulwark against communism”.24

Two prime motives can be traced behind his conversion. One was rejection of the Hindu Social System and the other was a belief in a religious way of life. He felt that religion alone can establish equality among human being and that Dharma is important for man and humanity. ‘He felt that Buddhist Dhamma was more democratic, ethical and egalitarian according to him and hence the inevitable choice’.25 He preferred to use the medium of religion to break away from caste structure; but he avoided class struggle.

Ambedkar tried to emphasise Dhamma as religion. He wrote a book ‘Buddha and His Dhamma’. This book was criticized bitterly. “Amberdkar’s Buddhism is based on hatred; Buddha’s on compassion. He preached non-Dhamma for motives of social reform”.26 Then again the Light of Dhamma commented : “Whenever he found views in Buddhism inconvenient to his own, he denounced them as later accretions made by monks.” Dr.Rhys Davids in his book ‘Buddhism’ remarked, “Gautam was brought up as a Hindu and lived and died a Hindu. His teaching was Indian throughout. He was the greatest and wisest and best of the Hindus.”27 It may be relevant to consider as to what has been the impact of Buddhism on its new adherents, the people who responded to the clarion call given by Dr.Ambedkar and embraced Buddhism. As of today, the largest number of
the followers of Dr. Ambedkar who have embraced Buddhism are in Maharashtra. They are as many as 84 percent of the total Buddhist population in the country. How far the religion of the Buddha has changed their lives has been studied by some research scholars. According to one of them, the following gains are worthy of note.28

(1) They have got rid of their inferiority complex. They have a fresh sense of identity and a newly acquired confidence. What is more, the youth among them have completely shed the old superstitions that had crammed their existence and have adopted a more rational view of life; and

(2) There is a new cultural and social renaissance, which has transformed Buddhist youth. They no longer believe in preordained fate or in any of the ancient rituals. Only hard work, education and a rational approach can bring progress, they believe. Compared to high-caste Hindu youth, their attitude seems to be firm, progressive and scientific.

In other words, the adoption of Buddhism has brought about a revolution in the attitude of the followers of Dr. Ambedkar. They have liberated themselves from the stranglehold of the dominant caste Hindus. And elected by the new feeling of pride, identity and cultural milieu, they no longer brook any indignity over their rights. Though economically still weak, they are marching ahead with courage and confidence.
LAST PHASE OF Dr. B.R. AMBEDKAR

On 15 October, the Nagpur Municipal Corporation presented Ambedkar with an address of welcome. He was described as “a social reformer, philosopher, and erudite constitutionalist”. On 16 October, he attended a mass conversion ceremony at Chanda.

Then Ambedkar went to Kathmandu to attend the World Buddhist Conference. It was to be inaugurated on 15 November 1956 by King Mahendra of Nepal. Speaking on the occasion he declared that Buddhism was not merely a religion, but a great social doctrine. He delivered a lecture on “Buddha and Marx.” He said that Buddha would not stand in the path of abolition of private property if the principle of the denial of private property was applied to society. Marxist and Buddhist methods differed. According to him, Buddhist method was the safest and soundest.

He returned to Delhi, and attended a function in honour of the Dalai Lama. On 4 December, he was present in the Council of States. He wrote two letters to P.K.Atre and S.M.Joshi about joining his proposed Republican Party of India.

On 6 December, Mrs.Ambedkar got up as usual, but she found Dr.Ambedkar no more. He passed away in sleep. It was the result of severe diabetic neurosis.
Pandit Nehru, G.B.Pant, Jagjivan Ram and others came immediately to Ambedkar's residence and made arrangements to transport the body to Bombay.

The Secretaries of Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha garlanded him, several members of Parliament, leading lawyers and eminent scholars paid their homage.

The body was received at the Santa Cruz Airport at 3 a.m. by thousands of people. The body was taken to Rajgriha, his residence in Bombay. Lakhs of people gathered to have a last glimpse of the departed leader. There was a spontaneous hartal and processions were held in many cities like Bombay. The procession in Bombay reached Dadar Hindu Crematorium after four hours. More than a million people witnessed the last rites performed by Buddhist priests. Over a lakh people embraced Buddhism at the Crematorium.

The nation mourned the death of Ambedkar. All parties said that in his death one of the greatest sons of India had passed away. His death removed from the political scene a figure which had prominently played for over thirty years a varied, vital and valiant role in the affairs of the nation. Democracy in the world had grown poorer by his death. Democratic thought had lost its great champion.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad, President of the Indian Republic, said that Ambedkar was the architect of our Constitution and his services in various
capacities, particularly for the uplift of the Depressed Classes, could not be exaggerated.

Veer Savarkar said that India had lost in Dr. Ambedkar a truly great man.

*The newspaper world* described him as a doughty, valiant and relentless champion of the Depressed Classes.

*The Times of India* said that he was an able, gifted and versatile man who in different circumstances might have rendered even greater services to his country and community.

*The Hindustan Times* observed thoughtfully; “What will remain is a recollection of his great services to the country and the impression left on his contemporaries of a vivid and versatile personality.”

*The Free Press Journal* said that the country would long remember him as one who righteously revolted against wrongs.

*The New York Times* said that Ambedkar was known and honoured throughout the world chiefly as a champion of the Untouchables. “What is,” it added, “perhaps not so well known is that he put a profound impress upon India’s major legal structures.”

Bhikku Anand Kausalyayan, Bhikkus from Malaya and Ceylon paid their homage. P.K. Atre speaking on the occasion said that Ambedkar fought injustice, oppression, and inequality; and he did not revolt against Hinduism but tried to reform it.
Pandit Nehru said in Lok Sabha that he would be remembered mostly as the 'symbol of revolt' against all the oppressing features of the Hindu Society. V.D. Savarkar, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, President of the Indian Republic, C. Rajagopalachari paid high tributes to Ambedkar. Leading journals praised his erudition, his immense work for the uplift of untouchables. The Times, London said that his name would figure prominently in any history of the socio-political evolution of India in the closing years of the British rule. U Nu, the Burmese Premier remarked that he was one of those who helped to accelerate the process of social change in the country.

Ambedkar's followers held a meeting in Delhi and requested the Government of India to make full investigation into his death. His son had also lodged a complaint with the police in Delhi. On 26 November 1957, Pandit Pant informed the Lok Sabha that Ambedkar died a natural death.
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