CONCLUSION

It would not be out of place to mention that the socio-economic conditions during the 6th century BCE paved the way for Buddhism. Brahmanism had become extremely rigid. Caste system no longer remained mere facet of religious and social life but became the focal point of the lives of the people. Brahmins claimed exclusive right over knowledge and based their superior status on it. They were followed by kshatriyas, who as chiefs ruled the ordinary masses in collusion with the Brahmins. However, the kshatriyas were no longer content with playing subservient role to the Brahmins. No wonder then, they became flag-bearers of the rebellion against the Brahmin supremacy.

This was an age of spiritual ferment. The rituals associated with the Brahmanic religion were also not suited to the then prevailing economic conditions. Cattle wealth had become quite useful for people on various agricultural operations. Sacrifices, hitherto a necessary ritual began to lose favour with the masses. Rigid ritualism which was antagonistic to the economic interests of the people had to be substituted to sustain agriculture and animal husbandry. The true search for knowledge provided a better and brighter alternative to caste based discrimination and hollow ritualism.

Buddhism appeared on the scene as the most viable and suitable option to Brahmanism. It represented positive and progressive thought. The use of iron facilitated agricultural production on a large scale which brought material progress and laid the foundation of cities. Cities were dependent on the hinterland for the supply of food provisions as the majority of population was engaged in non-agricultural occupations- one of them being trade. Travelling long distances is an intrinsic feature of trading activities. Whereas crossing rivers and water bodies was tabooed in the Brahmanic religion. The prosperity brought about by trade could be sustained only during times of peace and tranquility. Constant warfare, therefore, had to be discarded. Both these necessities of trade were recognized and supported by Buddhism. Through his message of non-violence and no bar to long-travels, it gained currency among the trading communities, which became its followers and funded its activities in large numbers.

Buddhism has come a long way from the days of the master. The Buddha covered long distances on foot for spreading his message far and wide. The religion
which started as a simple faith and was limited to the regions travelled by the Buddha has now spread across the world. Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Tibet, China, Japan, Hong Kong, Korea, Singapore, England etc. are the countries where Buddhism is a major religion. It has become popular even in the USA. It owes its vast reach to its simple teachings and missionary zeal of its followers. King Ashoka dispatched a mission comprising his daughter Sanghamitra and son Mahinda to Sri Lanka to propagate the teachings of the Buddha. Then onwards, Buddhists monk took upon themselves the responsibility to publicize the religion within and beyond India. Wandering monks essentially stationed themselves in monasteries and hoarded wealth. So much so that they were primarily targeted by the Muslim invaders, and the monks were hounded out of India. This became one of the reasons for the decline of Buddhism in India and its spread and popularity outside India.

Increasing prosperity obviated the need for alms rounds thereby distancing the monks from the lay followers. Alienation from the monks further alienated them from the teachings of the Buddha and thus Buddhism. The void left by Buddhism was filled by Hinduism, which was reinventing itself. The alienated laity was eventually assimilated with the reformed Hinduism.

Differences among the followers sometimes led to division in their ranks. The history of Buddhism is dotted by disunity and schisms. The very first division came as early as hundred years after the death of the Buddha, during the course of Second Buddhist Council. They were divided into Theravada (Hinayana) and Mahasanghikas (later came to be known as Mahayana). Mahayana resembled Brahmanism in practices and modes of worship. The obliteration of the difference between Mahayana and Brahmanism aided the absorption of the Buddhists by Brahmanism.

Buddhism was marred by decadence during this phase. Tantric practices corrupted the religion and led to the evolution of a new form of Buddhism, the Vajrayana. Vajrayana owed its origin to a large extent to the Shakta cult of Brahmanism, of which tantric rituals and practices are an intrinsic feature. Thus began the period of the decline of Buddhism.

During this phase Buddhism gained a foothold in countries like Myanmar and Sri Lanka. The movement for the revival of Buddhism began here with the 5th and 6th Buddhist Councils being held in Myanmar in 19th and 20th centuries respectively.
The revival began in India with the concerted efforts of the British officers. Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) undertook extensive excavations which unearthed the remains of hitherto past of the Indian civilization. Of the material excavated, Buddhist remains formed a major part. Buddhist stūpas and viharas were among the first remains discovered by the ASI.

Ashokan edicts were deciphered and many works were translated. However true efforts for revival were made by Anagarika Dharmapala, who established the Maha Bodhi Society of India, and focused attention towards repair and upkeep of the Bodh Gaya temple, which was in a dilapidated state. He was the first and foremost scholar to lead the revival movement in India. Almost a similar attempt was made by the Myanmarese monks, who helped in reinventing the past glory of Kushinara, the place of Buddha’s mahaparinibbana. This task was carried forward by noted scholars like D. Kosambi, Rahul Sankrityayana, Jagadish Kashyapa, and Anand Kausalyayana. They set about translating Buddhist canonical texts and got Pali studies introduced as a subject in the curriculum of various educational institutions.

They travelled to Tibet and China for collecting rare Buddhist literature including manuscripts and paintings. Chinese and Tibetan literature so brought to India was translated and preserved in the Kashi Prasad Jayaswal Institute in Patna. Due to their strenuous efforts they succeeded in establishing Nava Nalanda Mahavihara in order to give a thrust to Pali studies.

Buddhist teachings and philosophy were widely disseminated through dramas, poems and stories. Sarat Chandra Das, Rabindranath Tagore and Sir Edwin Arnold etc. are notable in this regard. Certain British civil servants, most notably Sir Alexander Cunningham, James Burgess and James Princep took personal initiative in the excavation work. Significant works in Pali were translated and published by Western authors of great repute. Buddhist literature of those times owes a great deal to authors like T. W. Rhys Davids, C. A. F. Rhys Davids, who founded the Pali Text Society, which did a commendable job in translation of Pali texts, and Th. Stecherbatsky, Senart, Poussin, Kosma De Coros, Fausboll, Oldenberg, Kern and B. C. Law.

On the Indian social scene, the gates of education and learning opened, albeit slightly, to sudras and ex-untouchables. They began to stake claim on public
employment, unhindered use of public water tanks. The progressive sudras and ex-
untouchables became torch-bearers in the search for an alternate religion that
guaranteed equality. Arya Samaj, Brahmo Samaj and even Christianity and Buddhism
attracted them.

Jyotiba Phule championed the cause of the down-trodden including women,
and initiated various movements against casteism and for safeguarding the interest of
farmers and women. Along with him Bhima Bhoi of Orissa created awareness among
the lower castes. These movements were the first step towards the adoption of rational
and egalitarian religion.

These movements received a great fillip with B. R. Ambedkar playing a lead
role henceforth. He had faced indescribable oppression and discrimination due to his
low caste. He understood very early in life that education was essential for generating
awareness among the lower castes about their plight. Extreme oppression of the
down-trodden in Hinduism and increasing awareness of the tenets of other religions
and philosophies of the world distanced Ambedkar from Hinduism. He read
extensively in his endeavour to find a potent substitute to Hinduism. He was deeply
influenced by the Marxist ideology. He used the Marxian tools for his various
hypothesis on economy. But he preferred Buddhism as he found solace in the
comparatively simplistic and non-violent teachings of the Buddha. Buddhism is a
social and atheistic philosophy, which favoured healthy relation between man and
man and not man and God.

He, thus, decided to get converted to Buddhism along with a massive lot of his
followers who numbered in lacs. And on 14th -15th October 1956, in a ceremony all of
them adopted Buddhism at Nagpur. Here Ambedkar gave a new shape to Buddhism
i.e. he devised distinct ways of conversion with an outright rejection of Hinduism. He
advocated some simple Buddhist rituals such as puja and simple Buddhist wedding
and funeral rites and believed that these should be cheap, transparent and non-
mystifying. Enlightenment is after all freedom from negative self-image, at least in
part. This new form of Buddhism came to be known as the Navayana. He also wrote a
book titled The Buddha and His Dhamma, which eventually became the sole religious
scripture for the new dalit converts to Buddhism. This book has, however, invited
severe criticism as the critics even went on to the extent that they called it as
‘Ambedkar and His Dhamma’. 

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For Ambedkar the cornerstone of French revolution i.e. liberty, equality and fraternity, was rooted in Buddhism. He believed in Buddhism as a social philosophy, which based itself on the tenet of fraternity. The cordiality between man and man was of utmost important in Buddhism. He found this in stark contrast to the animosity and bitterness among various castes in Hinduism. The religion which differentiated the people on the basis of their birth and not qualities was not worth following. He exhorted the lower castes to leave Hinduism and convert to Buddhism, which promised equality and dignity to all humans.

Ambedkar was of the firm view that the suffering of the lower castes would be mitigated, if they are empowered. He considered education as a powerful tool of empowerment and emancipation. Education would grant opportunities to secure Government jobs and enable them to upgrade their economic position and social status. This belief is realized today, when the lower castes have occupied higher jobs.

The larger goal of emancipation of the lower caste could only be achieved through political participation on a large scale. He had come to realize that the ultimate solution to the problems of the down-trodden lay in their acquiring political power. Despite his vision and efforts this goal could not be fully achieved during his life time.

The Constitution of India embodies the vision of Ambedkar in providing for reservation in Government jobs and legislative bodies for bringing the under privileged at par with the others. Earlier only the lower castes of the Hindus, Christians and Sikhs could benefit from the reservation policy, now this privilege has been extended to the Buddhist converts belonging to the scheduled castes with the passing of the Presidential order of 1990.

Even after Ambedkar, such development has aided the continuation of Buddhist revival movement. Although the caste related bitterness has mellowed down, still the lower castes are dissatisfied. Discrimination is no longer blatant but still persists, as the lower castes believe. Buddhism retains its appeal as an alternate religion for a number of them. Conversion figures of last few decades, bears testimony to this fact. There seems no reason why this trend should wither in the near future. The goal of political empowerment left unfulfilled during the time of Ambedkar, seem more achievable, with the establishment of Bahujan Samaj Party,
since its humble beginning, it has come a long way and has in some measure attained
the objectives set by Ambedkar.

For want of a strong line of leadership after Ambedkar the movement
gradually dissipated. It somewhat gathered momentum again towards the end of the
twentieth century. Sangharakshita remained the sole eminent Buddhist scholar after
Ambedkar, who propagated Buddhist philosophy through his organization Trailokya
Buddhist Maha Sahayaka Gana (TBMSG). However, the mantle of Buddhist spiritual
leadership thereafter, passed on to Dalai Lama.

Ambedkar advocated acquisition of political power, as it is the power which
librates. Ambedkar was influenced by three people whom he revered as his masters
the Buddha, Kabir and Phule. He had been through all adversities, grew to such a
position that he become the first Indian Law Member in the Viceroy’s Council, and
later the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution. He became
the unopposed leader of millions of the untouchables and other lower classes who
were victims to caste oppression.

He maintained that education is the necessary requirement for winning high
positions. To achieve this on a large scale, he even gave education an institutional
basis in the shape of Depressed Classes Education Society. Indian Labour Party (ILP)
supported the free and compulsory education which was realized recently through an
Amendment Act in 2003. He even was in favour of giving scholarship to the
‘deserving candidates’ belonging to the depressed classes. He proclaimed that
education should inculcate in them the growth of intellect and vision for moral and
social democracy.

Finally, he argued that in order to attain independence everyone should be
given education as well as special representation. Every ideology of his directed
towards gaining power, especially political power. To the labour he gave a call that it
should work diligently to establish the labour Government in India. Like the Buddha,
he too was against war. He further opined that like raising funds for war, why not
Government raise funds for the betterment of the labour and the down-trodden. Like
the communists, he too believed in complete state control over economy, and that
there should be no private property. TBMSG has developed a sophisticated
interpretation of Buddhist soteriological doctrine. It sees social revolutionary and
transcendental goals as complimentary.
BSP also traced its origin in Ambedkar’s ideology. And its members use the
greeting ‘Jai Bheem’. Kanshi Ram, in 1971, launched the Scheduled Castes and
Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes and Minority Communities Employees’
Association. He organized them on the bases of Ambedkar ideology. But he also
included among them the minority communities which formed the Bahujan Samaj.

A lot of people belonging to the lower classes are getting converted to
Buddhism in mass conversion ceremonies, while sporadic conversions, here and
there, are quite usual. Some recent examples could be cited like the London based
news agency Reuters in its issue of April 9, 2001, mentioned that the lower caste
Hindus were planning to get converted to Buddhism in large numbers in Kolkata.
Over the issue of conversion Dalai Lama said that the two religions, however, are
twin brothers.

According to the BBC news agency, on 14 October 2006, thousands of people
have been attending the mass conversion ceremonies in India at which hundreds of
Hindu Dalits converted to Buddhism in Nagpur. By doing so, they were trying to defy
the caste prejudices and discrimination that they often face. The ceremonies marked
the 50th anniversary of the adoption of Buddhism by Ambedkar. Another conversion
ceremony held in Mumbai at Mahalaxmi Race Course is evident through the news
paper The Hindu’s online edition of May 28, 2007. Here more than one lakh dalits
and tribal Hindus got converted to Buddhism. The ceremony was attended by around
four lakh people, many of whom came from the tiny pockets of Maharashtra, to mark
the golden jubilee year of Babasaheb Ambedkar’s conversion. The ceremony was
organized by the Republican Party of India. Several such ceremonies were evident in
the previous decades too.

Buddhism is a great religion which favours equality in its true spirit, not only
in theory but also in practice. It does not have the oppressive features of Hinduism,
like caste system, idea of sacred, gods, soul, or transmigration, which justifies low-
birth. It is not divine like Hinduism but social. It simply bases itself on the relation
between humans, not with gods. This makes it easy and reasonable to follow. Thus it
can be considered a viable option for all the oppressed people.

According to the Census of India reports, there were around 1,80,000
Buddhists in India in 1951, which increased considerably in 1961 to 32,56,036, which
shows a 1700.67 percent decadal increase in the population of Buddhists. From 1961 to 1981, the growth had been around 20 percent. And from 1991 to 2001, there was 24.5% increase. The new converts to Buddhism are known as the neo-Buddhists. The data of religious census as available through Census figures show that there is a clearly recognizable growth of Buddhist population in India. The most conspicuous difference appeared in the Census of 1951 and 1961. This decade shows the highest percentage increase in the Buddhist population in India. The data has been supported by the conversion ceremonies that keep occurring here and there.

There is a continuous increase in the population of Buddhists in India from 1951-2001, and probably, even now, as the fresh conversion ceremonies indicate. The process of proselytization is still going on. The signs of the revival can be seen from the fact that there is a large scale construction of Buddhist temples and viharas. Prayers and public meetings are held, where Buddhist scriptures and songs are chanted. Thus, with the above mentioned data and the evidences of mass conversion ceremonies, it would not be out of place to say that Buddhism revived in India due to the efforts of Western, Asian and Indian scholars and, above all, Ambedkar. After his death the task was pursued by his followers. His impact can be seen that even today the down-trodden look towards Ambedkar for the mitigation of their sufferings, in their hope for attaining social and economic justice.