AMBEDKAR’S REINTERPRETATION OF DHAMMA

Religion has always played an important role in giving shape to a society as well as its history. Some form of religion is always necessary for society, but it should be a universal, moralistic, and rational religion which supports a just order. Ambedkar foresaw this in Buddhism. Ambedkar took some of the features of Buddhism quite seriously like no god, no soul, no caste etc, and he then tried to stretch them to their logical limits and attempted a reconstruction of Buddhism in that light.

Ambedkar reinterpreted Buddhism according to his own understanding and as suited to the prevailing circumstances. What he did, went very well with the tradition as it became a trend to reintroduce the philosophy while discovering hidden meanings of the original texts. The propounders of different schools of Buddhism and commentators have re-arranged and reinterpreted Buddha’s statements and derived basic tenets for their respective schools. Thus what was the core teaching in one school became peripheral in another school. On the other hand, the core teachings, however, remained central to all the sects. The schools were given different names like Hinayana (Thervada), Mahayana and Vajrayana. That is why Ambedkar’s reinterpretation of Buddhism was given a new name i.e. Navayana as it was a very novel and unique interpretation given to Buddhism which was quite peculiar in comparison to all the other existing forms of Buddhism.

Ambedkar’s Navayana was the final product of his spiritual, political and social quest. In his book The Buddha and His Dhamma, he sets out to reconstruct Buddhism as a global ideology responding to the demands of modernity and culture. He attempted to incorporate certain insights, arguments and criticisms from his earlier writings and practices in this grand design. He introduced a remarkable paradigm shift into the interpretation of Buddhism. A religion which originates in a critique and questioning of the prevalent attitude in social life, calling upon men to renounce and transcend the world while formulating principles of ethical conduct for those who remain in the world, is here being converted into a prerequisite essential to secure the working of society.
However, a mixed response was observed regarding Ambedkar’s work *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. He had to meet with strong criticism for the book. Jivaka wrote the book’s review and observed that Ambedkar had reduced Buddhism to a mere social Philosophy (which had nothing to do with religion). He also said that the name of the book should be changed from ‘Buddha and His dhamma’ to ‘Ambedkar and His Dhamma’ as it preaches non-dhamma doctrines as dhamma for the purpose of political objective and social reform. The journal published from Rangoon, ‘The Light of dhamma’, claimed that Ambedkar was sabotaging the Buddhist texts, omitting what was not in consonance with his ideology. D.R. Jatava says that Ambedkar was extrapolating from Buddhism more than conventional Buddhism did. The most severe criticism of Ambedkar’s conversion was that he moved away from the actual issue of social reform and that his decision to convert was escapist and nothing but a ‘reactionary step’. The Marxists condemned him that he failed to adopt scientific method to eradicate material sorrows and thus tried to find an alternative in conversion to Buddhism.

The knowledge of the converted Indian Buddhist is limited to ‘The Buddha and His Dhamma’ and to a few books translated from Pali into Marathi and Hindi such as the Dhammapada, the Suttanipata, and the Dighanikaya. Hence to propagate Buddhism among masses, the translation of the whole Tripitakas into Marathi, Hindi and other regional languages is necessary to make people know their religion better. For this to be achieved, small booklets and pamphlets must be distributed among them free of cost like Christian Missionaries do. Dalit sympathizers compared Ambedkar’s writing and movement to contemporary ‘religions of the oppressed’ or to a kind of ‘liberation theology’. Notwithstanding their differences, the scholars quoted above, have some similarities like his acceptance of Buddhism is considered a genuine option by all of them; his interpretation of Buddhism is considered mainly as the social gospel for the untouchables, and thereby its broader significance is played down. Ambedkar’s ideological proclivities (inclination) and encounter with diverse intellectual tendencies, which invariably stamped his approach to Buddhism, are not fully taken into account, with insufficient attention being paid to the context of debate and discussion.
On the other hand according to Madan, Ambedkar’s hermeneutics of Buddhism were based on a) the contention that it is rational and scientific and is based on experience. b) Its contestation of divinity and c) its principle of recognizing social relationship. According to Ambedkar, the Buddha’s religion was not revelation and that the Buddha was no prophet. And that Buddhism is ‘discovery’ in the sense that it is the “result of inquiry and investigation into the conditions of human life on earth and understanding of the working of human instincts with which man is born, the moulding of his instincts and dispositions which man has framed as a result of history and tradition and which are working to his detriment.”

Buddha left his message open to question and test, and also declared that his followers are ‘free to modify or even to abandon any of his teachings if it was found that at a given time and is given circumstances they did not apply” According to Ambedkar, the Buddha was only a ‘Margadata’ and not a ‘Mokshadata’.

There are animated debates on the term varna and jati, but since the present work focus mainly on Ambedkar, they are skipped.

**Origin of Untouchability**

The origin of the four varnas is attributed to the mythical story found in the Purushasukta hymn in the tenth mandal of the Rigveda. This is, however, considered as an interpolated part. It is however reproduced with slight changes in the later Vedic literature, epic tradition, Puranas and dhammashastras. The hymn says that the brahmin emanated from the mouth of the primeval man, the ksatriya from his arms, the vaishyas from his thighs and the sudra from his feet. Purushsukta also have been referred to in the nineteenth book of the Atharvaveda. In the same book there are two more references to the existence of four varnas. In the Rigveda, the division of labour was extended to a large extent. However, the members of the same family worked as poet, physician and grinder, and this did not involve any social distinction. But towards the end of the period of Atharvaveda, differentiations of functions tended to develop into differentiations of rank, and tribes and clans gradually disintegrated into social classes.

According to R. S. Sharma, “In 1847 it was suggested by R. Roth that the sudras might have been outside the pale of the Aryan Society. Since then it has usually been held that the fourth Varna of Brahmanical society was mainly formed by
the non-Aryan population, who were reduced to that position by the Aryan conquerors. This view continues to derive support from the analogy of conflict between the white coloured Europeans and the non-white population of Asia and Africa."\(^{25}\)

H.W. Bailey shows that the racial theory cannot be drawn uniformly from the term *Arya* in all the *Rigvedic* references in which it is used. The term *Arya* could be derived from the base ‘ar’, which means ‘to get’.\(^ {26}\) In the Iranian context *Arya* means possessor or noble.\(^ {27}\) Thus it can be inferred that the *Aryas* of the *Rigveda* were either the possessors of wealth or nobles or both. But in a pastoral society such forms of wealth or property could not be accumulated.\(^ {28}\) The *Rigvedic* society was organized neither on the basis of social division nor on the basis of property. It was, on the other hand, based on the kin, tribe and lineage.\(^ {29}\)

R.S. Sharma concludes that the *Aryan* tribes mentioned in *Rigveda* might not belong to the same ethnic group, but they may share a common linguistic and cultural tradition. Ambedkar on the other hand developed a different theory for the origin of the *sudras*. Ambedkar wrote in the Preface of *Who Were the Sudras?*, that it is a general conviction that the Indo-Aryans were divided socially as *chaturvarnas*. It includes four classes namely *brahmins* (priests), *ksatriyas* (soldiers), *vaishyas* (traders) and *sudras* (menials). But according to him this was not simple division of society and thus it does not convey the magnitude of its severity. “Besides dividing society into four orders, the theory goes further and makes the principle of graded inequality the basis for determining the terms of associated life as between the four *varnas*. Further this system of graded inequality was not merely notional or symbolic. It is legal and penal. Under this system the *sudra* is not only placed at the bottom of society but he is also subjected to numerous ignominies and disabilities so that he could not rise above the standard set for him by law."\(^ {30}\)

Therefore, Ambedkar said that it preaches a class-composed society as its ideal, and described and analyzed it critically in different points.\(^ {31}\) He sums up:

1. In the scheme of *Purushsukta*, the real is elevated to the dignity of an ideal.
2. No community has given the de-facto state of class composition a legal effect by accepting it as a de-jure connotation of an ideal society.
3. No society has accepted that the class composition is an ideal. At the most they have accepted it as being natural. It not only regards class composition as natural and ideal, but also regards it as sacred and divine.

4. The number of the classes has never been a matter of dogma in any society known to history. The division of society into four classes is, on the other hand, a matter of dogma.

5. Every society leaves a class to find its place vis-à-vis other classes according to its importance in society as may be determined by the forces operating from time to time. But the Purushasukta fixes a permanent warrant of precedence among the different classes which is based on the principle of graded inequality, which neither time nor circumstances can alter.

He argued that Purushasukta had really been unique if it had preached a classless society as an ideal form of society.32

According to Ambedkar, there was no military conquest of non Aryan by the Aryan. And to support his argument, he argues that the Rigveda contains evidence of any invasion from outside. On the contrary they mentioned the rivers as “My Ganges, My Jamuna”.33 Thus it could be said to be an invention, and called it absurd. He further says that the distinction between Aryas and Dasas and Dasyus was not racial distinction of colour or physiognomy.34

The European scholars mostly interpreted the word “varna” as colour and the theory of chaturvarna has been derived out of it. But According to Ambedkar, if it is so then there must be four different colours to account for all the four classes of chaturvarna. But none mentions that the theory starts only with two people Aryas and Dasas- one assumed to be white and the other assumed to be dark.35 He then analyzed the views of European scholars and concluded thus:-

1. The Vedas do not know any such race as the Aryan race.
2. There is no evidence in the Vedas of any invasion of India, by the Aryan race and its having conquered the Dasas and Dasyus supposed to be the natives of India.
3. There is no evidence to show that the distinction between Aryans, Dasas and Dasyus was a racial distinction.
4. The Vedas do not support the contention that the Aryas were different in colour from the Dasas and Dasyus.36
There had been many theories that have been put forward to explain the origin of untouchability. These are cited by Prof. R.S. Sharma in his pioneer work *Sudras in Ancient India*, and they include:-

1. As mentioned in Dhammasutras, untouchability is attributed to the intermixture of castes.
2. It has been suggested that in the majority of instances the origin of untouchables took place as a consequence of complete isolation and loss of tradition of the Buddhist communities. This view was further developed by Ambedkar.
3. It is also considered that the people who continued beef eating were condemned as untouchables.
4. It is also thought that untouchability is not original Indo-Aryan institution, but was a thing borrowed from the Dravidians, where untouchability played an important role even to this day.
5. It has also been attributed to the impurity attached to certain occupations. and
6. The cultural lag of the aboriginal tribes, who were mainly hunters and gatherers, is also considered to be one of the causes for the origin of untouchability.

Ambedkar cited some examples from *Rigveda* and concluded on the basis of those verses that there were two Aryan races and not one. To support his view he argues that it is a well known fact that there are really two Vedas: 1. the *Rigveda* and; 2. the *Atharvaveda*, and the *Samaveda* and *Yajurveda* are merely different forms of *Rigveda*. It is also well known that *Atharvaveda* was not recognized as sacred as *Rigveda* by the *brahmins* for a long time. It is because the two belonged to the two different races of *Aryans*, and it is only when they became one that the *Atharvaveda* came to be recognized on an equal footing with that of *Rigveda*. He based his conclusions after a thorough study of Brahmanic literature like the *Taitteriya Samhita*, the *Shatapatha Brahmana*, the *Taitteriya Brahmana*, the *Taitteriya Aranyaka*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* and the Puranas.

Another evidence that he gave in defense of his theory is on the basis of the Cephalic Index of 1901 given by Herbert Risley, wherein it is asserted that the Indian people are a mixture of four different races:-
1. the Aryan
2. the Dravidian
3. the Mongolian and
4. the Scythian

Risley’s conclusions were later on tested by Dr. Guha in 1936, and the latter concluded that there were people of two racial stocks in India:-
1. Long Headed (in the interiors of India)
2. Short Headed (in the outskirts of India).

Thus speaking in terms of the Alpine and Mediterranean race, it can be concluded that Indian people belong to the two different stocks 1. the Mediterranean (long headed) and 2. the Alpine (short headed)\(^40\)

Ambedkar concluded from the above analysis that there is a direct conflict between the Western theory (which says there is only one Aryan race) and Rigvedic theory which says there are two Aryan races in India). But as the Rigveda is considered to be the best evidence on the subject and the theory which is in conflict with it must be rejected. He further said that the Western theory is only a hurried conclusion drawn from insufficient examination of facts.\(^41\)

Generally, it is held that the Aryans were fair and the others were dark. And the word “varna” means colour but Ambedkar refutes this theory. He gave examples from Rigveda about association of fair and dark and that the word “varna” as depicted in Rigveda denotes several meanings like somewhere it is used for indicating darkness\(^42\), at other place it seems to depict class\(^43\), at yet another place it is used for the deities like Ushas, Agni and Soma etc., and meant luster, features or colour.\(^44\) Even the sociologists, lexicographists and historians also maintain divergent views about the actual meaning of the term.

Ambedkar also cites examples from the Zend Avesta (Iranian religious text) and maintains that the word varna means a class holding to a certain faith and had nothing to do with colour or complexion.\(^45\) Finally he summarizes his conclusions derived from the analysis of Indian and Western theories as under:-

1. The Vedas do not know any such race as the Aryan race.
2. There is no evidence in the Vedas of any invasion of India by the Aryan race and its having conquered the Dasas and Dasyus supposed to be natives of India.

3. There is no evidence to show that the distinction between Aryans, Dasas and Dasyus was a racial distinction.

4. The Vedas do not support the contention that the Aryas were different in colour from the Dasas and the Dasyus.46

For Ambedkar the Dasas and the Dasyus were not savage people. On the other hand, they were civilized and were more powerful than the Aryans. He completely refutes the propositions that Dasas and Dasyus were one. He said that these terms are mentioned separately in the Rigveda around 54 and 78 times, respectively, and if they were not different, what was the need to use two different terms so many times.47

There is another proposition that the Dasas and the Dasyus and sudras were the same people. This theory was also rejected by Ambedkar on the basis that the word sudra occurs only at one place in the Rigveda and that too in a context in which the Dasas and the Dasyus have no place. One more fact is that the terms Dasa and Dasyu completely disappeared from the later Vedic Literature which means that they were completely absorbed by the Vedic Aryans,48 and for this he develops three propositions:-

1. The sudras were Aryans.

2. The sudras belong to the ksatriya class.

3. The sudras were so important a class of ksatriyas that some of the most eminent and powerful kings of the ancient Aryan communities were sudras.49

Interestingly, he gives evidence from the ancient texts. In the Shanti Parva of Mahabharata, there are verses which prove that a sudra can be a king and can perform a sacrifice with the assistance of brahmin priests in lieu of dakshina given to them for performing sacrifices.50

Kautilya also calls the sudra an Aryan.51 He further says that originally there were only three varnas among the Indo-Aryans, brahmins, ksatriyas and vaishyas. Further Ambedkar considers the arguments of some scholars who do not find the prevalence of varna system in the Vedic age. But he suggests that it is in direct conflict with vedic texts. Thus, in the Rigveda brahmin, ksatriya and vaishya are
mentioned several times apart from the Purushasukta, but sudra is mentioned only once. On the other hand, the Shatpatha and the Taittiriya Brahmanas have mentioned the creation of the three varnas only. It can be postulated that there were only three varnas and the sudras were only a part of the second varna.52

On the degradation of the sudras he advocates that it was due to the violent conflict between the sudras and the brahmins, for which he again has cited various examples like the dispute between the sudra king Sudas and Vasishtha, the brahmin recluse.53

Ambedkar’s thesis on the origin of sudras can be summarized as under:-

1. The sudras were one of the Aryan communities of the solar race.
2. The sudras ranked as the ksatriyas in the Indo-Aryan society.
3. There was a time when the Aryan society recognized only three varnas. The sudras were not a separate varna but a part of the ksatriya varna.
4. There was a continuous feud between the sudra kings and the brahmins, in which the brahmins were subjected to many tyrannies and indignities.
5. As a result, of the hatred towards the sudras due to their tyrannies and oppression, the brahmins refused to invest the sudras with the sacred thread.
6. Owing to the loss of the sacred thread the sudras became socially degraded, and consequently fell below the rank of the vaishyas and came to form the fourth varna.54

Thus it can be said that, whatever the varna system may be, the sudras were not degraded deprived or menial people in the beginning. Rather they were the part and parcel of the Aryan society. As there was no objection in ancient India of a sudra becoming a king and the brahmin priests performed the sacrifices for them in lieu of dakshina, and the arrangement worked well.

Caste, according to Ambedkar, is the natural outcome of certain religious beliefs which have the sanction of the Shastras, which are believed to contain the command of divinely inspired sages who were endowed with a supernatural wisdom and whose commands, therefore, cannot be disobeyed without committing sin. Hence the destruction of caste is a reform. And to ask someone to give up their caste is contrary to their fundamental religious notions. Caste also has a divine basis therefore you must destroy the sacredness and the divine basis with which caste came into
being, which means discarding the authority of *Shastras* as well as *Vedas*. But the task of destroying caste was near to impossible due to certain reasons. These are as follows:

1. It was due to the attitude of hostility of *brahmins* towards caste reformation. Because challenging of caste system can lead to their loss of position, which they are holding since time immemorial.

2. The other reason is that reforms are always initiated by an intellectual class which in India is constituted by the *brahmins*.

3. One more reason is that caste divides men into separate communities and places them in a graded order one above the other in social hierarchy. Each class takes its pride and its consolation in the fact that in the scale of hierarchy it is placed above some other caste, thus making near to impossible, the organization of a common front against caste.

This was Ambedkar’s own presumption, absolutely novel and original. But the scholars have not given any place to his theory in the sociology of origin of the *varna* system, if anybody does; it is only a passing reference. It might be so, because he was not a historian or a sociologist in clear sense of terms, and his conclusions are possibly drawn as a result of social subjugation that he bore. It, however, shows the influence of Mahatma Phule on Ambedkar.

**The Untouchables**

Untouchability is a curse for a society. However it is being practiced in India since time immemorial. Hinduism seems to be the only religion which gave sanction to the institution of untouchability.

Ambedkar started his book *The Untouchables* with the condemnation of Hinduism. He criticized the Hindu civilization, since it certifies ‘untouchability’, and hence it “could hardly be called a civilization. It is a diabolical contrivance to suppress and enslave humanity”.

According to Ambedkar the idea of pollution prevalent in all kinds of ancient societies was quite similar to what was prevalent in a primitive society. They have devised certain methods to veil off these impurities. There have been many terms used in the *Dhammashastras* which testify to the existence of impure sections of
society, but none of those give any satisfactory answer to the origin of untouchability. They only talk about impure people, who lived on the outskirts of villages as could be made out from the terms Antya, Antyaja and Antyavasin. But why did they live outside the village? To explain this Ambedkar took the example of his own community “Mahars”. He noted that Mahars were the principal community of Maharashtra and is to be found in every village, outside the village wall and do the duties of watch and ward. In return they were given 52 rights against the Hindu villagers. Which include:-

1. the right to collect food from the villagers;
2. the right to collect corn from each villager at the time of harvest; and
3. the right to appropriate the dead animal belonging to the villagers.

The primitive society constituted of the tribal nomads. These communities were based on kinship ties. They owned cattle but gradually they acquired land and became settled. There was then continuous tribal warfare, and the defeated tribes broke into bits. Thus, these broken men had the problem of shelter and security. Therefore a bargain was struck between the settled tribe and the broken men, where broken men agreed to do the work of watch and ward for the village tribe and in turn the settled tribe promised them food and shelter. As they belonged to different tribe, they started dwelling outside the village. He further wrote that they lived outside the village from the very beginning as they were the broken men, who belonged to a different tribe than the ones who settled in the villages claiming the village land. The only difference among them is that they belonged to different tribes and that there is a time gap between their settlements because the village tribe had settled earlier than the tribes who lived outside who came to be called as the broken men.

The issue of origin of untouchability had pre-occupied the scholars and has led to unending debates among them. Some important ones are given below:

1. Stanley Rice gave two conditions for the origin of untouchability i.e. Race and Occupation. His racial theory contains two elements viz. (i) the untouchables are non-Aryans, non-Dravidian aboriginals; and (ii) they were conquered and subjugated by the Dravidians. He further suggested that there have been two invasions of India, first by the Dravidians and the second by the Aryans. But
Ambedkar refuted the theory as being too mechanical and simple to explain such a complex issue of the origin of sudras and untouchables.

2. According to Ambedkar, the term Dravidians and Nagas are only two names for the same people. The Nagas was a racial and cultural name and the Dravida was their linguistic name. They occupied not only south but the whole of India. Dasas are the same as the Nagas and the latter are the same as the Dravidians. Thus there can at most be only two races, the Aryans and the Nagas.67

3. Further it is observed that according to anthropometry the untouchables belonged to the same race to which the brahmins belonged, whether they be the Aryans or Dravidians or Nagas. Such being the facts, the theory propounded by Mr. Rice must be said to be based on a false foundation and presumption.68

4. The theory that the Aryans and untouchables belonged to the same race is further supported by the evidence and studies by Risley (Census 1901) in Maharashtra and Rose in Punjab. Their study was based on the exogamous groups known as gotra or kula. If the same kula or gotra were found to exist in different castes and communities, it would be possible to say that the castes, though socially different were racially one. Thus, the racial theory of the origin of untouchability must be abandoned.69

5. Another theory is based on occupation. According to Rice, the origin of untouchability is to be found in the unclean and filthy occupations of the untouchables.

But every society must have people who perform such unclean works, then why were they not considered untouchables? Ambedkar further observed that there existed slaves to do all the impure works and labourers for the pure works. And this slavery should exist in the descending order (Anulomeyna) i.e. a brahmin could have a brahmin, a ksatriya, a vaishya and a sudra as his slave; a ksatriya could have a ksatriya, a vaishya and a sudra as his slave and so on.70 Thus, the people of all varnas could be slaves. Ambedkar further argued that, if scavenging was not loathsome to an Aryan how can it be said that engaging in filthy occupations was the cause of untouchability? Thus the theory is untenable.71
Ambedkar then directed his attention towards the problem of broken men as to why they developed antipathy for brahmins. He observed that the broken men were Buddhists, therefore brahmins preached contempt and hatred against them and they came to be regarded as untouchables. But we have no direct evidence that they were Buddhists. He concluded that the new approach to the search of origin of untouchability gave rise to two sources of its origin. One is the general atmosphere of hatred and contempt which the brahmins created against those who were Buddhists. Since untouchability struck to broken men only, it is obvious that there was some additional circumstances which had played a part in fastening untouchability upon the broken men. And the second is the habit of beef-eating kept on by the broken men.

But what made brahmins, the greatest beef eaters, become vegetarians? To this Ambedkar replied that it was a strategic step and its idea can be found in the conflict between Buddhism and Brahmanism and the means adopted by Brahmanism to establish its supremacy over Buddhism. He further said that Buddhism was once the religion of majority of the people of India which it continued to be so for hundreds of years. And “as a result of the spread of Buddhism, the brahmins had lost all power and prestige at the Royal Court and among the people. Buddhism had made so deep an impression on the minds of the masses and had taken such a hold of them that it was absolutely impossible for the brahmins to fight the Buddhist except by accepting their ways and means and practicing the Buddhist creed in its extreme form”. So, after the death of Buddha, his followers started setting up his image and started building the stupas. The brahmins followed it and constructed temples and installed images.

The objective of the brahmins in giving up beef-eating was to snatch away the supremacy that Buddhist bhikkhus governed. Thus, without becoming vegetarian the brahmins could not have recovered the ground they had lost against Buddhism. The practice of sacrifice was central to Brahmanism to which Buddhism was strictly opposed. Thus, in an agricultural society revulsion against Brahmanism, which support killing of useful animals like cows and bullocks, is natural. And to recover their lost ground they went a step further than the Buddhist bhikkhus and gave up meat-eating altogether and became vegetarians. They also made the cow a sacred animal, and the brahmins then were followed by the non-brahmins. The cow became sacred, but the broken men continued to eat beef. There was no other fate left for the broken men except to be treated unfit for association i.e. as untouchables.
But why they did not imitate the *brahmins* like the non-*brahmins*? Firstly, it was too costly as the flesh of dead cow was their principle sustenance. Secondly, carrying the dead cow became a duty for the broken men, which was earlier a privilege. So, as they could not escape carrying the dead cow, they did not mind using its flesh as food. Thus, the view is tenable that broken men became untouchables as they kept on beef eating, even when the *brahmins* stopped it.\(^{77}\)

After an in depth research regarding the origin of untouchability Ambedkar formed the following thesis:-

1. There is no racial difference between the Hindus and the Untouchables.
2. The distinction between the Hindus and Untouchables in its original form, before the advent of Untouchability was the distinction between tribesmen and broken men who subsequently came to be treated as untouchables.
3. Just as untouchability has no racial basis, so also it has no occupation basis.
4. There are two roots from which untouchability has sprung:-
   a) contempt and hatred of broken men as of Buddhists by the *brahmins*.
   b) continuation of beef eating by the broken men after it had been given up by others.
5. While working on the origin of untouchability it is borne in the mind that untouchables are different from the impure.
6. The impure as a class came into existence at the time of the *Dhamma Sutras*, while the untouchables came into being much later than 400 C.E.\(^{78}\)

To the question of when the institution of untouchability originated, Ambedkar made an analysis of different sources of the Hindus, religious as well as secular documents. On the analysis of *Manu Smriti*, he observed that there was no untouchability during Manu. The chandalla as mentioned in Manu is only an impure person, he did not even prohibit beef eating or cow killing.\(^{79}\)

According to D.R. Bhandarkar, the killing of cow was made a capital offence by the Gupta kings around 4\(^{th}\) C.E. On the other hand, unlike Fa-hien, the Chinese traveler Hieun Tsang, who came to India in 629 C.E. mentioned that the chandallas adopted distinguished signs which probably shows that untouchability came into
existence by 600 C.E. Thus, Ambedkar concluded that untouchability might have started somewhere around 400 C.E., i.e. during the Gupta period.

As Ambedkar derived that untouchables were originally Buddhists, thus taking refuge in Buddha, dhamma and sangha would be like returning home. But it should be done with a new insight which developed out of centuries long oppression of untouchables at the hands of the caste Hindus. Therefore, it was not adopted blindly.

And Ambedkar reinterpreted Buddhism according to the need of time, and rationalized it. And in doing so, he was only revitalizing and rejuvenating Buddhism.

Here, it can be observed that untouchables were not originally a class. They were despised as untouchables because they did not follow the brahmins in abandoning meat-eating. On the other hand, they lived outside the village boundary and thus seem to be independent people who did not require any authentication and legitimation from brahmins. They were not part of the crowd, but gradually the brahmins and their supporters and followers i.e. ksatriyas and vaishyas, being larger in number, started despising them for their being offensive towards brahminalical ideals. This might have given rise to the institution of untouchability.

**Ambedkar’s Interpretation of dhamma**

Ambedkar died some two months after his conversion to Buddhism on 6th December 1956. His death was celebrated as Mahaparinibbana, in which thousands of dalits took part from all over Maharashtra. He led the movement of revival of Buddhism in the land of its birth, thus making his interpretation of the dhamma as more important. It provides an interesting outlook of what Buddhism is, and what was its impact on the Indian society and what is going to be its impact on the future Indian Society.

In his *The Buddha and his Dhamma* Ambedkar tried to bring Buddhism to the world of social action and social change. He purposefully got converted to Buddhism i.e. to provide a way to liberate himself and his people from the misery of untouchability and thereby to bring about a social change. According to Ambedkar, Buddhism was not simply spirituality but a rational and psychologically oriented path (dhamma) designed to help suffering humanity and make this world free from sorrow.
The choice and interpretation of Buddhism by Ambedkar was not sudden. “It followed over a century-and-a-half of social radicalism, pioneered by a ‘sudra’, Jyotiba Phule, in Maharashtra, that was marked by strong anti-caste movements both among wide sections of non-brahmins in south and west India and among dalits throughout India.”86 Buddhism attracted him as an equalitarian, universalist and rationalist creed.87

Ambedkar, first of all, denied the four things in the introduction of his most coveted work The Buddha and his Dhamma:
1. He rejects the traditional version of Buddha’s paribbajaka. He argued that the four sights are so common that it is not possible for a 29 years old man that he might not have seen them.
2. He is doubtful if, the four Aryan Truths are part of original gospel of the Buddha, because, if it is so Buddhism seems pessimistic as it denies hope for man.
3. In Buddha’s teachings there is a contradiction between the theory of kamma and rebirth on the one hand and the denial of existence of soul on the other hand.
4. What was the purpose of creating a bhikkhu by the Buddha? Was a bhikkhu a perfect person? Or was he to create social servants, who could devote his life serve the people as their friend, philosopher and guide. (here he is giving way to what is known as the ‘Engaged Buddhism’). These could said to be some radical and bold questions raised by him in his understanding and interpretation of Buddhism.88

**The Paribbajaka (The Going Forth)**

As is widely known, even to the lay reader, the tale of the paribbajaka of the Buddha was due to the four scenes that he saw of a sick man, an old man, a corpse and an ascetic. And he left his home in search of truth. But Ambedkar’s version say that it was due to this reason that the Buddha wanted to avoid the war between the Sakyas and the Koliyas.89 The dispute was over the use of waters of the river Rohini for irrigation purposes.90 And he took to wandering. Later even when the warring clans had finally concluded peace, he decided to continue his paribbajaka as he thought it to be the right way.91

On this reinterpretation Sangharakshita observed that “Ambedkar’s retelling of the story of Buddha’s early life is an imaginative reconstruction rather than the
Thus, according to Ambedkar’s interpretation, Buddha’s search started with the communist problems of social exploitation and class struggle. The Buddha observed in Ambedkar’s words that “the problem of war is essentially problem of conflict. It is only a part of larger problem”. He further says that “the conflict between nations is occasional. But the conflict is constant and perpetual. It is this which is the root of all sorrow and suffering in the world.” And the Buddha continued his paribbajaka to solve the wider problem of social conflict.

The Buddha condemned those who preached antagonism and ill-will. According to the Buddha if we can destroy greed and craving in individuals or in the nations, the root cause of wars and confrontation will be eradicated. Remove hostility and there will be peace. This is the message of the Buddha on the prevailing problem of war and peace. This is in accordance with how Ambedkar interpreted Buddha’s Mahabhihnikhraman. With this explanation, Ambedkar may have wanted to pull attention towards the caste and class conflicts, which became an indispensable part of Hindu society, to which he was a victim and so opposed it vehemently. And possibly he might have been trying to pull attention towards the larger problem of the issueless quarrelling between the people as well as between the nations.

The First Sermon

According to the traditional version the first sermon given by the Buddha was about the Four Aryan Truths of suffering (dukkham). But according to Ambedkar’s interpretation, Buddha gave his sermon about the Madhya Marga. Answering the question that, if he still believes in asceticism by the five paribbajakakas, the Buddha said that, “there are two extremes, a life of pleasure and a life of self-mortification”. The “Buddha” as Ambedkar observed “rejected both the paths as unbecoming to man. He was a believer in Madhya Marga, which is neither the path of pleasure nor the path of self mortification.”

According to Ambedkar as the Buddha elaborated upon his doctrine, he preached that the centre of his dhamma is man as well as relation of man to man. Secondly, he said that “men are living in sorrow, in misery and poverty. The world is full of suffering and that how to remove this suffering from the world is the only
purpose of dhamma”. “It is the foundation and basis of his dhamma”.

Further, as Ambedkar explains, the Buddha emphasized the path of purity, which included five precepts (Panchsila), i.e. not to injure or kill; not to steal what is not yours; not to speak untruth; not to indulge in sensual misconducts; and not to take intoxicating drinks. Everyone should abide by these principles as these are the most essential for every man. “For every man must have a standard by which to judge whatever he does.” And these principles form the basis by which to measure one’s conduct.

Ambedkar’s denial of ‘dukkha’ as the central tenet of Buddhism emerged due to the acceptance of the widespread notion that it contains the view that Buddhism as a religion is pessimistic and that it leads to escapism. He disregarded all the views which consider it as the essence of Buddhism. He reiterates the point that sufferings in this world is inevitable, but the purpose of Buddhism is to end suffering in this world. He concluded his chapter on the first sermon of the Buddha by observing that the Buddha says that, “No doubt my dhamma recognizes the existence of suffering but forget not that it also lays equal stress on the removal of suffering. My dhamma has in it both, hope and purpose. Its purpose is to remove Avijja, by which I mean ignorance of the existence of suffering. There is hope in it because it shows the way to put an end to human suffering.

Ambedkar expounds a paribbajakaka saying; ‘dhamma is not concerned with life after death nor with rituals and ceremonies; but its centre is man and relation of man to man. The world is full of suffering and how to remove it is the function of dhamma.

On the other hand, it could also be said that the end to suffering and enjoyment of happiness are inherent in the Buddha’s teaching of impermanence, which says nothing is permanent in this world. Everything is in a constant flux, so are the suffering and happiness. And this kind of diversion from traditional view might be due to the reason that Ambedkar must have thought that with the suffering as its first and foremost teaching, Buddhism may sound quite pessimistic to lay people. As they are not so well read, they might not be able to read between the lines and extract the true meaning of the Buddha’s message. Thus, to make it easily understood, popular and practicable, Ambedkar might have devised this exegetics.
Ambedkar on Conversion

Ambedkar made it very clear that the primary content of religion was social. The savage society was concerned with life and preservation of life and it is these life processes which constitute the substance and source of the religion of the savage society. So great was the concern of the savage society for life and preservation of life that it made them the basis of its religion. What is true of the religion of the savage is true of all religions wherever things are found for the simple reason that constitutes the essence of religion. It is true that in the present day society with its theological refinement this essence of religion has become hidden from view and is even forgotten.

Thus Ambedkar appealed to people that “you must take the stand that the Buddha took … that Guru Nanak took. You must not only discard the Shastras, you must deny their authority, as did the Buddha and Nanak. You must have courage to tell the Hindus, that what is wrong with them is their religion-the religion which has produced in them this notion of sacredness of caste. Will you show that courage?

But this is not for conversion for religious gain but for upward social mobility. It was not even political. Regarding the conversions of dalits Ambedkar said that: Notwithstanding their being Hindus, they are isolated from the Muslims and the Christians because as Hindus they are alien to all Hindus as well as non-Hindus. This isolation can end only in one way and in no other way that is by joining some non-Hindu community and becoming a part of it.

He was getting almost everything of Hinduism by choosing Buddhism except the caste system, which was not even required. Rest of the Buddhism is almost similar to present Hinduism. Both the religions have borrowed from each other heavily. So if read in depth there is only slight distinction between the two. On the other hand after 1990 the process of conversion speeded up due to the presidential order of 1990 by which reservation is extended even to the Buddhist Scheduled castes.

Thus by slightly changing their religion they became a different social lot. The social stigma of untouchability has now vanished. Now they came to belong to a different religion and a different social class. They are the emancipated lot now.

Ambedkar compared the Buddha with the founders of other major religions-Jesus, Mohammad and Krishna of these the Buddha stands out for his ‘self-
abnegation’ and because he did not claim any supernatural authority, or infallibility. On the other hand, it was appealing to reason and experience. Therefore, his followers ‘were free to modify or even abandon any of his teaching if it was found that at a given time and given circumstances they did not apply’.109

Ambedkar pressed hard to know what actually the Buddha stood for. He thus enquires: what are the teachings of the Buddha? This is a question on which no two followers of the Buddha or the students of the Buddha agree. To some Samadhi is his principal teaching, to some it is Vippassana; to some it is esoteric, to others it is exoteric; to some it is a system of barren metaphysics; to some it is sheer mysticism, selfish abstraction from the world and to some it is systematic repression of every impulse and emotion of the heart.110

According to Ambedkar the Buddha’s teachings were not compiled. In the first council, if Kassyapa would have collected the record of the Buddha’s life, there would have been a complete and authentic account of the Buddha’s biography. One more reason for this is that he did not appoint any successor.111 Same problem is there with Ambedkar also. Even he did not appoint any successor, who could look after the conversion movement after him. This became a great impediment in the process of conversion movement.

It is said that Ambedkar chose Buddhism due to its Indian origin. But this was not only reason. The following ideals also might have attracted him towards Buddhism as evident from his last work The Buddha and His Dhamma:

1. Buddhism emphasized the role of reason as against faith or superstition.112
2. As a result, Buddhism rejected many objects of dogmatic belief, such as God and Soul, which was accepted by most of the other religions.113
3. Buddhism strongly opposed the caste system and it is the strongest supporter of equality.114
4. Buddhism emphasized morality as an essence of good life. This morality according to Buddhism was essentially human centric and has no reference to soul or to God.115

Ambedkar was searching for a humanist and social religion, which ended in Buddhism.116
Ambedkar due to his failing health could not form an organizational base for further conversion. But in 1979, the Trailokya Buddha MahaSangha Sahayaka Gana (TBMSG) was founded under the auspices of friends of the Western Buddhist Order, based in Great Britain (it is now known as the Triratna Buddhist Community) by Bhikkhu Sangharakshita. It acts as the institutional basis for the propagation of dhamma, imparting the practices of meditation to Neo-Buddhists. It also works for their education, health security and other welfare activities. It does not have a broad base. Neither does it have any locally available agencies for preaching and conversions.

**Idea of God and Soul**

Ambedkar’s attitude towards religion is not spiritual; his approach to religion is intellectual and socio-political. He developed his theory of God, while explaining the evolution of religion. According to him the concept of God developed to explain natural phenomena. Thus Ambedkar rejected the concept of God that God created religion. He considered religion in relation to individual and society.

Ambedkar observed that belief in God is not dhamma. On the question of how god came into existence, Ambedkar says that for this there is no answer. God cannot create something out of nothing and if he created something out of something then that something already existed. Thus, he cannot be called the Creator of the world. The world thus, has evolved.

According to Ambedkar the Buddha gave various reasons for why he did not believe in God. One is that God is unknown and unseen; he is said to be the creator of the world, but he is not as world has evolved.

Ambedkar maintains that the Buddha does not see any advantage of believing in God. “It only ends in creating superstition.” If the Brahma is the Creator and he is the unvanquished, “then why are we, who are created by that Brahma, have come hither, all impermanent, transient, unstable, short lived, destined to pass away.” The Buddha again argued that if God is omnipotent and is all efficient, why he created man at all? Further, if God is good then why do men become murderers, thieves, unchaste, liars, slanderers, and abusive babblers, covetous, malicious and perverse? Its cause must be Ishvara. Is it possible with the existence of God, who is said to be good?
On the question of God being omniscient, just and merciful, the Buddha said that “if there is a supreme Creator who is just and merciful why then does so much injustice prevail in the world?” And if such things happen “God is not just and good or God is blind.”

One more reason for the Buddha’s denial of God is that he had no faith in religious rites, ceremonies and observances as they were mere superstitions to him which is contradictory to the concept of Samyaka Drishti, the most important element in eightfold path.

Buddhism, in general, does not believe in God but it believes in various supernatural beings known as devas. Early Buddhism, however, does not have faith either in God or in any supernatural phenomenon and so does Ambedkar’s Buddhism have no faith in God or any supernatural being or power.

Ambedkar says that belief in soul is not dhamma, and he observed, that the Buddha said that religion based on soul is based on speculation. Like God nobody has seen soul. Again the Buddha was critical to the existence of soul on the basis that it created priesthood, gave birth to superstitions, and gave priesthood complete control over man from birth to death. For Ambedkar belief in sacrifices is not dhamma. Belief in anything based on speculation is also not dhamma. Belief in infallibility of any books of dhamma is also not dhamma. He also seemed to have shared the opinion that by being silent the Buddha denied the existence of God. The basis for this denial is that there are so many things which are going wrong. And how can these wrongs and evils persist if there existed a God, who is just and the preserver of all?

**Kamma and Rebirth**

Ambedkar interpreted the doctrine of kamma quite differently than what is said to be the original gospel of the Buddha. According to Ambedkar the Buddha’s doctrine of kamma has been wrongly recorded. He called it an interpolation for if it is true, how is Buddhist kamma different from Hinduistic conception of kamma. And if it is so, what or who is the carrier of kamma to the next birth. To remove this contradiction Ambedkar repudiated the aspect in which Buddhist kamma is explained and gave a fresh interpretation.

According to Ambedkar, the Buddha believed in the regeneration of matter and not in the rebirth of soul. Because, Ambedkar has the Buddha say that, “after
death the body ceases to produce energy.114 And “that whatever energy that had escaped from the body joins the general mass of energy playing about in the universe.”135 Thus, Ambedkar concluded that “the Buddha was an annihilationist so far as soul was concerned. He was not an annihilationist so far as matter was concerned.” Thus, approving of two aspects of annihilation i.e. cessation of production of energy and new addition to the general mass of energy to the general floating mass of energy, thus proving that the Buddha was neither annihilationist nor eternalist.136

To understand the difference between Hindu law of kamma and Buddhist law of kamma, first we have to understand the doctrine as preached by the Hindus. The Hindu law of kamma is based on the existence of a soul. kamma produces two-fold results. It affects the doer and each act produces an impress upon his soul. When the man dies, soul escapes, which is full of such impressions. And these impressions then determine his birth and status in the next life.137

On the other hand, “the Buddha’s Law of kamma applied only to kamma and its effect on present life.”138

It is argued that “the theory of law of kamma does not necessarily involve the conception that the effect of which is more of social than individual.139 “He did not believe in the inheritance of the Past kamma”140 and reinterpreted it as the scientific-genetic inheritance “kamma recoils on the doer of it and there is nothing more to be thought about it. This is an error. Sometimes the action of one affects another instead of the doer. All the same it is the working of the law of kamma because it either upholds or upsets the moral order. Individuals come and individuals go, but the moral order of the universe remains and so also the law of kamma which sustains it.”141

Ambedkar’s reinterpretation of the doctrine of kamma owes much to the view that because of bad kammas in previous life one is born low as untouchables, thus justifying the position of low and the lowly as a result of their past bad kammas which Ambedkar wanted to repudiate.

Taking an example from the Cula-Dukhka-Khanda-Sutta, which contains dialogue between the Buddha and the Jains, it says that “how could the Buddha throw doubt on past kamma if he believed in it? How could the Buddha maintain pain and pleasure in present life being due to environment if he believed that it was due to the
past kamma?” He further says that this doctrine “is quite inconsistent with the Buddhist doctrine of non-soul.” How the Buddha, who was known as Maha Karunika, can accept such a doctrine which justified the pitiable condition of the poor and the lowly. Moreover, the Buddha’s followers are drawn from all castes and classes. There are among them brahmins, paribbajakakas, merchants, kings, officials, professionals, low castes, women, vagabonds, robbers and criminals. True dhamma, according to Ambedkar, does not confine knowledge to a few, as Ambedkar blamed the brahmins.

Thus it can be said that Ambedkar reinterpreted the theory of kamma to repudiate the conception that one is born low due to the effect of his past bad kammas, as it justifies untouchability.

AHIMSA

Ambedkar saw a great confusion among people regarding the Buddha’s doctrine of Ahimsa, because they find it difficult to accept Ahimsa as an absolute obligation. It is also observed that the doctrine of Ahimsa is practiced differently in different countries. The monks of Sri Lanka fought against the foreign invaders while Myanmarese monks refused to do so. The German Buddhist Association accepted all the Panchsilas except Ahimsa.

Ambedkar observed that the Buddha had no objection to eating meat if it was offered to him as part his alms. And he was only opposed to the killing of animals in Yajna. (Sacrifice) Most importantly he said “Love all so that you may not wish to kill any”. He said, thus it is quite clear that the Buddha here wants to make a distinction between “will to kill and need to kill”.

He concluded that Brahmanism has a will to kill, Jainism has in it the will never to kill and the Buddha’s Ahimsa is quite in keeping with his middle path. The Buddha did not make Ahimsa a rule but principle for “rule either breaks you or you break the rule” but principle leaves you freedom to act.

Ahimsa is the original gospel of Buddhism. It does not mean not to kill any living being, rather it means not to kill anyone till the time they do not harm anyone. But if they have become harmful or dangerous then they can be killed also. Thus, it can be argued that the Buddha forbade direct form of violence while he does not see any vice in one’s own defense, which further implies in it Ambedkar’s interpretation.
of need to kill. However, Ambedkar does not deny the intrinsic value attached to it in Buddhism.

NIBBANA

There are so many debates regarding the interpretation of the word nibbana in Buddhism, but no unanimity among scholars could be observed.

Ambedkar argues that before the Buddha, there were four ways in which nibbana could be attained: i) Laukika, which was too materialistic; ii) Yogic, according to Ambedkar, was a temporary state, and happiness brought by it was negative and lasted as long as the yoga; iii) and (iv) Brahmanic; and Upanishadic, which involve in them a permanent entity different from body i.e. soul.

But the Buddha’s conception of nibbana was quite different. According to Ambedkar, of all the doctrines taught by the Buddha, doctrine of nibbana is the most central one. He has the Buddha say that a man is unhappy due to his greed (lobha), anger (dosa) and delusion (moha). All these passions are called fetters which prevent a man from reaching the state of nibbana. The moment he is free from his passions i.e. he learns to achieve nibbana, man’s way to happiness is open to him. Thus, “nibbana is visible in this life and not merely in future.”

According to Ambedkar, scholars are at fault when they say that nibbana means extinction of all human passions, which is equivalent to death. But according to Ambedkar’s thesis “nibbana means release from passion.” Again, “rooted in nibbana, the righteous life is lived. nibbana is its goal. nibbana is its end.” Nibbana does not mean extinction, and it can be achieved by simply following the Noble Eight-fold Path.

Citing difference between nibbana and Parinibbana Ambedkar said that according to Udana: “Parinibbana occurs when the body becomes disintegrated, all perceptions become stopped, all sensations die away, the activities cease and consciousness goes away. Thus Parinibbana means complete extinction.” While nibbana means control over passions so as to enable one to walk on the path of righteousness.

Thus to remove all confusions about nibbana, Ambedkar concluded that, complete annihilation is one extreme and Parinibbana is another extreme. nibbana is
the middle way. His interpretation of nibbana, thus, is not very different from the usual explanation that is suggested by other scholars on Buddhism.

**Dhamma and Religion**

Ambedkar believes that the Buddha’s *dhamma* differ from that of the religion, and religion according to Ambedkar is said to be personal and it does not play a part in public life. On the other hand, the *dhamma* is social and righteous, which suggests good relations between man and man. It was not meant for an individual, but where a man lives in relation to other man, they must find a place for *dhamma*, or, it can be said that society could not do without *dhamma*.

Further, according to the Buddha, *dhamma* consists of *prajna* and *kamma*. *Prajna* is knowledge, which the Buddha includes in his *dhamma* to ward off all superstitions. *Kamma* is love (compassion) without which society can neither live nor grow. Ambedkar has the Buddha to say that *dhamma* is concerned with right conduct, detachment, and purification from lusts, quartered, tranquillization of heart, real knowledge, insight and finally *nibbana*. It is a method for the cessation of *Dukkha*.

He observed that morality is not the root of religion as it consists of God, soul, prayers, worship, rituals, ceremonies and sacrifices. In religion morality derives its sanction through God and is, therefore, casual and occasional. Whereas in *dhamma* morality has replaced God. It is the essence of *dhamma* as it derives from the direct necessity of man to love man. For Ambedkar *dhamma* is secular which sanctifies nothing divine and which appeals to the intellect. It suited all in all circumstances be it ancient time or modern world. Indeed, it is the only religion that the world should have.

According to Ambedkar, the Buddha divided the *dhamma* into three categories. First is *dhamma*, second is Not-*dhamma* (*Adhamma*) and the third is *Saddhamma*, which is another name for philosophy of *dhamma*.

The *dhamma* advocated purity of life through abstinence: from taking life, from stealing and from sinful living i.e. to abstain from falsehood. And also by keeping the mind pure by keeping it aware of personal desires, remitting those desires and stopping them from recurrence. The purity of life also implies in it the purity of body, speech and mind.
The dhamma is giving up desires or craving and passions. In the Dhammapada, the Buddha says “There is no greater benefit than health and there is nothing more valuable than the spirit of contentment.”\(^{167}\)

The dhamma is to consider that nothing is permanent in this world.\(^{168}\) That is why everything keeps on changing. “If things were not subject to continual change but were permanent and unchangeable, the evolution of all of life from one kind to the other and the development of living things would come to a dead stop… The progress of the human race would have come to a dead halt.” It thus teaches “do not be attached to anything.”\(^{169}\)

Second category is what is not the dhamma? Ambedkar says that ‘belief in supernatural is not the dhamma.’ Because the Buddha preached that everything has a cause attached to it (dependent origination).\(^{170}\)

In repudiating supernaturalism the Buddha had three objects. One was to lead man to the path of rationalism, second was to free man to go in search of truth and third was to remove the most potent source of superstition, the result of which is to kill the spirit of inquiry.\(^{171}\)

It is evident that he has made a clear distinction between the term Religion and the dhamma. He gave the name religion to all sorts of theistic philosophies, and called Buddhism the dhamma, which is atheistic, secular, righteous, moral and above all social and rational. He considered Buddhism the only true religion, which the world should have.

**Sangha and the Role of Bhikkhu**

The Buddha divided his followers into two categories: the bhikkhu and the upasaka (lay followers).\(^{172}\) To simplify the things, Ambedkar mentions two types of conversions. One is the conversion to the order of bhikkhus called the sangha, and other is the conversion of a house-holder as an upasaka or a lay follower. To become an upasaka there is no ceremony, but to become a bhikkhu one must undergo a ceremony called Upasampada.\(^{173}\) It is also prescribed that a bhikkhu ceases to be a bhikkhu if he commits a breach of major vows or as and when he wishes to give his membership, of the Order but with prior notice.\(^{174}\)

The sangha was open to all without any restraint of caste, sex and social status. Inside the sangha all were equal and rank was regulated by worth not by
birth, and it was a miniature socialism, since there existed no private property there. Ambedkar has the Buddha say that the sangha is like ocean and the bhikkhus are like rivers, that falls into ocean. The river has its separate name and separate existence. But once it enters the ocean it loses its separate identity and becomes one with the rest. Same is the case with the sangha, when a bhikkhu entered the sangha he become one with the rest. The only distinction which was observed inside the sangha was that of sex. This separation was necessary to avoid any sort of immorality within the sangha.

The entrants in the sangha were divided into two classes: the bhikkhus and the Sramanera. By taking Trisaranas and by taking the ten precepts a boy (of below the age of 20) could become a Sramanera. He could leave the sangha and become a layman at any time.

According to the Buddha “the purpose of Tathagata in coming into the world is to befriend those poor and helpless and unprotected, to nourish those in bodily affliction, whether they be samanas or men of any other religion to help the impoverished, the orphan and the aged, and to persuade others to do so. This, in latest conceptualization, can be said to be an example of engaged Buddhism.

A bhikkhu, as Ambedkar has the Buddha say, should not be hypocritical and deceitful, envious and grudging, cunning and crafty, hard hearted and vain, entertain false opinions, and become possessed of metaphorical dogma. He should be a model person in his way of behavior.

Ambedkar makes a distinction between a bhikkhu and a brahmin. A brahmin is always a brahmin while the bhikkhu is made and the latter’s status is earned so he can also be unmade if by his conduct he makes himself unworthy of remaining a bhikkhu. A brahmin can acquire unlimited property but a bhikkhu cannot. A brahmin is a priest and his main function is to perform certain ceremonies connected with birth, marriage and death. He also believes in God and Soul, while bhikkhu perform no such ceremonies and does not believe in God and Soul. Ambedkar’s Buddha taught compassion which means that everyone shall love and serve and the bhikkhu is not exempt from it.

According to Ambedkar sangha was an autonomous and independent body, which functions according to Vinaya. Any Paribbajaka could become its member.
after having obtained the higher ordination i.e. Upasampada. For a bhikkhu there was a Sangha-Diksha ceremony to allow him admission in the Order but there was no ceremony by which the upasaka is initiated into Buddhism, and due to this, the laity becomes loosely attached and was free to change their religion any time or they can also follow more than one religion at the same time. And Ambedkar sees in it as one of the major causes for the decline of Buddhism in India. The only bond between them was that the laity provided alms to the bhikkhus. Because of this the laity unknowingly started getting absorbed in Hinduism as they follow Hindu rituals for marriage, birth and death and gradually become Hindus. For this short-coming of Buddhism, Ambedkar devised a number of rules called dhamma-Deeksha ceremony, where a lay man, who wish to enroll in Buddhism, had to take 22 oaths (as mentioned in the previous chapter) to become a lay devotee.

On the allegation by some critics on Buddhism that it is not a religion Ambedkar replied that perhaps it is the only religion and those who do not accept it must revise their definition of religion. Some other critics say that Buddhism is meant only for the bhikkhu and not for the laity. To this Ambedkar said that merely because the sermons were addressed to the gathering of bhikkhus it must not be supposed that what was preached was intended to apply to them only. On the other hand, what was preached applied to both. He argues further that the Buddha has laity in mind when he preached:

i) Panchshila
ii) the Arya Ashtangika Marga; and
iii) the Paramitas,
as is evident from the very nature of things.

According to Ambedkar, the Buddha wanted to lay the foundation of “a kingdom of righteousness” on earth, with his dhamma. But he knew that without showing the practicability of a righteous life he could not pursue people to make an effort to live ideally. Thus he created the bhikkhu sangha as the model of society. There is a difference between bhikkhu and the upasaka. The bhikkhu was the torch bearer of the Buddha’s ideal society and the upasaka was to follow the bhikkhu as closely as he could.
On the question of the function of bhikkhu, he said that he must devote to self-culture as well as serve the people and guide them, because without self culture he would not be fit to guide and, therefore, he must be a perfect, righteous and enlightened man. He further said that a bhikkhu who is indifferent to the woes of mankind, however, perfect in self-culture, is not at all a bhikkhu. He may be something else but he is not a bhikkhu.\textsuperscript{187}

Thus he gave a very high ideal of a bhikkhu, which is quite difficult to follow. As he was the model to follow, he should keep himself pure in every sense of the word. And as the bhikkhu is the scale to measure oneself, it was practicable too.

\textbf{ENGAGED BUDDHISM}

In the modern world, a number of Buddhists have come to advocate what has been called ‘Engaged Buddhism’, a term coined in 1969 by the Vietnamese Zen monk Thich Naht Hanh, at a time when the war was ravaging his country. Christopher Queen holds that “the most distinctive shift of thinking in socially engaged Buddhism is from a trans-mundane...... to a mundane liberation”, so as to focus on “the causes, varieties and remedies of worldly suffering and oppression” through the reform of social and political conditions, as well as of the mind.\textsuperscript{188}

Ambedkar completed his work, \textit{The Buddha and his Dhamma} towards the end of his life. It is said by Christopher Queen that in spite of certain literary failings, this book remains a landmark on the road to socially engaged Buddhism.\textsuperscript{189}

Engaged Buddhism is the ‘Middle Way’ of the Buddha, which teaches that both the extreme asceticism and the extreme sensual indulgence are to be avoided; it has emphasized that even the lines and practices of monks who live austerely should not be excessively ascetic, and that the life of even the most lax Buddhist lay person ought not to be so pleasure oriented as to become an object of attachment. It is in avoiding these two extremes, that the extent of the Middle Way is vast wide and very flexible.\textsuperscript{190} Therefore, even though it is acknowledged that Buddhism is a religion of renunciation and transcendental understanding, the challenge to Buddhist praxis was, and is, to create, and to perpetuate an institutional framework that is ‘of the world’, yet at the same time ‘out of the world’.\textsuperscript{191}

Even in their earliest stages... Buddhist Monastic Communities developed symbolic and reciprocal relationships with the laity. Monks and nuns became...
responsible for teaching the middle path and gained respect and patronage by their own exemplary moral conduct. Lay persons responded by providing food, clothing and shelter for the monastic community and by regarding the ascetic life as a paradigm of the ethical, religious path. But later the members of sangha became self-centred and forgot their duties towards the spiritual welfare of the people. The objective of social service and altruism, placed before them by the Buddha was completely lost, i.e. the missionary zeal to which the modern Buddhist had given the name of Engaged Buddhism.

Ambedkar cites in *The Buddha and his Dhamma* that: *dhamma* is social, *dhamma* is righteousness, which means close and intimate relations between man and man in all spheres of life. From this it is evident that one man, if he is alone, does not need the *dhamma*. But society cannot do without *dhamma*.

Ambedkar has never kept himself aloof from the society and its problems. His Buddhism was definitely socially engaged as it was to ameliorate the condition of the downtrodden in the society. He took up the problems of the untouchables, oppressed, unseeables and unapproachable. He worked towards social, economic and above all, the political emancipation of all.

After Ambedkar’s death, Sangharakshita took up the charge of propagating Buddhism far and wide. He used to visit the areas where Ambedkar’s followers resided and conducted conversion ceremonies. Inspired by Ambedkar, Sangharakshita’s organization Friends of the Western Buddhist Order later on established the Trailokya Buddhist Mahasangha Sahayaka Gana (TBMSG) in England.

TBMSG represents an impressive non-sectarian network of Buddhist communities across India, in which *dhamma* and Social service are closely intertwined. It provides grassroots indigenously-led meditation retreats and Buddhist training for thousand of *dalits*. It is also involved in social work like childcare, schools, literacy projects, development of libraries, medical programmes, training for self sufficiently (reliance) and self-employment.

Coming back to Ambedkar’s role, he saw a Buddhist *bhikkhu* not as a holy man but a social worker, who works for the benefit of society. He reprimanded the untouchables and consistently made untouchables aware of their self-respect and the
need for their emancipation. He said “My heart breaks to see the pitiable sight of your faces and to hear your sad voices. You have been groaning from time immemorial and yet you are not ashamed to hug your helplessness as an inevitability. Why did you not perish in the pre-natal stage instead? Why do your worsen and sadden the picture of the sorrows, poverty, slavery, and burdens of the world with our deplorable, despicable and detestable miserable life? You had better die and relieve this world if you cannot rise to a new life and if you cannot rejuvenate yourselves. As a matter of fact it is your birth right to get food, shelter and clothing in this land in equal proportion with every individual high or low. If you believe in living a respectable life, you believe in self-help which is the best help.”

Ambedkar to some extent respects the difference between religion and society, and between historical epochs—but he thinks that the Buddha fostered thinking along these lines. According to him, the Buddha was the “earliest and staunchest upholder of equality”. He was the first who laid emphasis on the social relationship of man to man. Ambedkar’s intentions reached far beyond his Mahar community. This goal was not only to obliterate untouchability but the whole of the caste system.

While explaining kamma as the instrument of moral order Ambedkar observes that the Buddha says that “do kusala kamma so that humanity may benefit by a good moral order which a kusala kamma helps to sustain; do not do akusala kamma for humanity will suffer from the bad moral order which an akusala kamma will bring about” which means that kamma is social and moral and cannot be seen in its individual aspect as the whole society has to bear the brunt of bad kamma or reward of a good kamma.

Like the Buddha, Ambedkar, too, was a great intellectual person. In the teachings of the Buddha, it is seen that first the question arises, problem appears and then the solution is given and then the policies or principles are made. Same is the approach employed by Ambedkar in his writings. He first raised the questions and then answers them in detail following an in depth research well in conformity with the contemporary social tensions.

According to a survey conducted in 1962 by the Gokhale Institute of Research, Poona, the impact of the change of religion by scheduled castes was ‘tremendous’. The report further says that the scheduled caste people have now
become one and are trying to establish a casteless society on the principles of Buddhism. By getting converted, they are now leading a dignified and honourable life in the society.\textsuperscript{205}

The impact of the teachings of the Buddha was reported by Arun Siddhu in 1978 after a long and thorough research and remarked that the ex-untouchables of India have got rid of their inferiority complex. Now they feel confident and have got rid of all superstitions. They have received a new cultural and social identity and have started believing in education and have adopted a rational approach.\textsuperscript{206} But he also said that as far as the economic status is concerned there is not much improvement, but there was a transition from superstition to rationalism which further gave rise to hunger for education.\textsuperscript{207}

In 1979, Siddhu again conducted a survey on the neo-Buddhists in Nagpur. To the question whether the religious conversion was spiritually satisfying, all answered yes and further asserted that the purpose of conversion was realized. They also said that it has created a new outlook towards life, all superstitions decayed and they have achieved much of what Ambedkar aspired for. They have gained self-respect and are enjoying elevated status. On the other hand, one of them asserted that he has achieved everything, politically and socially, if not spiritually. However, some others considered that the purpose is not fully achieved.\textsuperscript{208}

The population of Buddhists in India was decreasing since 1881 because the areas of Myanmar (which is pre-dominantly a Buddhist country) got separated from India. In 1921 Census the Buddhists in India were only 27,6000, while their number was 15, 50000 in 1881,\textsuperscript{209} which after the conversion of Ambedkar started increasing considerably.

The most distinguished forms of greeting that the neo-Buddhists have is to greet one another saying \textit{Jai Bheem}, which does remind them of their common bond of affinity.\textsuperscript{210}

Though Ambedkar certainly believed in the liberation of the individual, he saw clearly that in the modern world, the priority must be institutional liberation. Now the individual liberation has to be replaced by a struggle against institutionalized bondage.\textsuperscript{211}
In spite of all the drawbacks, the conversion movement got a spur when the Presidential Order of 1990 was passed, which states that: In accordance with the SCs/STs Order (Amendment) Act 1956- “No person who professes a religion other than the Hindu or the Sikh religion shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Castes”. However, this Act was amended further by the Scheduled Castes Order (Amendment) Act, 1990 which provides that members of SCs included in the Presidential order and converted to Buddhist religion shall continue to be deemed to be member of SCs. This has further strengthened the rank of the struggling multitudes of down-trodden people, who now set eye on the capture of political power. The message that Ambedkar was trying to preach did not reach masses in its actual spirit. Due to the lack of an able successor, leave alone one or two, his movement did not go well with the other religious movements. He had made no institutional base of any kind to support his movement. Without an institutional framework of local level, how could the movement become widespread? Yet, the movement is running successfully all over India, but on a smaller scale than anticipated. It could have been more widely followed; if there had been some popular leader after him, who would have overtaken the responsibility of preaching the Navayana Buddhism among the downtrodden masses. It would have also progressed if there would have been an institutional framework carried out by Ambedkar himself for the purpose. But nothing of the sort was done.
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