CHAPTER -I
INTRODUCTION

Babasaheb Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) was born to fulfill a mission. He was a messiah of the poor, the weak and the downtrodden. He is truly called the last great social reformer of the 20th century. Babasaheb Ambedkar is often referred to as the modern Bodhisattva. He spent his entire life to liberate and emancipate the scheduled castes and the ex-untouchables of India and restore to them their rightful place in the social hierarchy.

Dr. Ambedkar's mission was to free the downtrodden from the yolk of slavery accorded by the previous caste system. After several attempts to organise reform movements and after having failed to move the upper castes, he came to the conclusion that the Hindu religion was not capable of giving spiritual salvation nor was the rigid caste system capable of providing social equality and dignity to the oppressed masses. His solution then was to free his people and offer them a new path a new religion which would provide both solace and respect human dignity. Thus his search for an alternate religion led him towards the teaching of Lord Buddha.

In this chapter an attempt has been made to review some of the available literature on the search for a New Religion culminating in the formation of Neo-Buddhism and the status of Neo-Buddhists in India. Through the literature presented in the chapter an attempt is made to put in the proper perspective the status, the conditions and the social change, if any, experienced by the followers of Ambedkar.
In assessing the impact of Dr. Ambedkar's influence on the scheduled caste people, B.G. Gokhale (1976:14-23) observes that Ambedkar who has often been called "Modern Manu" had challenged Hinduism "Where it was must vulnerable, the caste system and its correlate untouchability. The bastions of the system have begun to show cracks, but it will be a long time before they will crumble. As his final riposte, Ambedkar led millions of his follower, into a new religion in October 1956 in the hope that they would escape the tyranny of the caste system". But Gokhale further observes in continuation. "But in hundreds of villages in Maharashtra they simply seem to have exchanged one label for another, for now they are to be taken to be "untouchable Buddhists".

In conclusion Gokhale feels that of general indications are any reliable guide, the conversions have not made much difference in the day to day life of the Neo-Buddhists in rural areas. On the contrary he says that "Tensions between Mahars converted to Buddhism and caste Hindus, especially of the Maratha caste, are sporadically reported in the press. The paradox is that whereas the Brahman seems to have accepted the awakening of the Mahar and his new status, the dominant Maratha caste seems to have sharpened its hostility toward the Mahar turned Buddhist in some areas" (Ibid : 23).

From Gokhales point of view much of the caste conflict in parts of Maharashtra are now between the Marathas and the Neo-Buddhists. Even the rate of conversion has reached a plateau and the life of the neo-Buddhists has not changed much.

A similar conclusion has been drawn by Adele M. Fiske (1972:92) who feels that during the last few decades the condition of the Neo-
Buddhists in India has not changed much and many of them still face intimidation, boycott, eviction and denial of grazing rights by the dominant castes in their villages. Fiske examines in this context the legal position of the Neo-Buddhists who are not really "Hindu scheduled castes". Hence they become vulnerable as the anti-disabilities measures and other welfare government programmes such as reservations in jobs, educational scholarships, seats in legislatures cannot be extended to them Buddhists are excluded from them, though recently the government of Maharashtra has extended them facilities to Neo-Buddhists Fiske therefore observes that many neo-Buddhist students do not therefore admit their religion until they complete their education are well settled in life.

However an important point made by fiske is that inspite of converting to Buddhism, the sub-caste differences between themselves have remained. Thus social relations and marriages seldom take place between Buddhists of different scheduled castes. Hence outwardly they are Buddhists, but amongst themselves there are still numerous Buddhists sub-castes. Unless these sub-caste differences are merged, the neo-Buddhists cannot make a significant impact on the caste system.

Timothy Jetzgerald (1994:28) draws a similar conclusion after making a systematic research surveys of Neo-Buddhists and says "Not only caste endogamy but sub-caste endogamy is still prevalent".

Fitzgerald opines that neo-Buddhism can gain strength only if there is sufficient interaction between the new converts and international Buddhist association. Further, there are several Buddhist organisations such as All India Blukka Sangh, Bharatiya Buddha Mahasanga, Sramner
Upasaha Prachar Sangha and Bharat Brahman Bhbhu Sangh, but no one really knows their activities and what work they are doing for the welfare of the Neo-Buddhists. He feels that the Tralokya Buddha Mahasangha Sahayak Gana or TBMSG which is active in certain parts of Maharashtra should extend its activities to other parts of the nation and thus unite Neo-Buddhists from different parts of India.

However, Gopal Guru (Economic and Political Weekly 16 Feb. 1991) feels that the TBMSG will not be much help for the cause of Neo-Buddhism as it lays an emphasis on spirituality and “transcendental mediation” while the real Buddhism as propagated by Ambedkar was practicle and not “other wordily”.

D.C. Ahir (1994:14) feels the Neo-Buddhism’s greatest achievement was that it helped the converts to shed their inferiority complex and observes. “In other words, the adoption of Buddhism has brought about a revolution in the altitude of the followers of Dr. Ambedkar. They have liberated themselves from the strangle-hold of the dominant caste Hindus. And elated by the new feeling of pride, identity and cultural milieu, they no longer brook any indignity over their rights. Though economically still weak, they are marching ahead with courage and confidence. This ushers well for a social change”.

Calling Dr. Ambedkar a liberate of the depressed classes N.G. Meshram (1994:75) observes that along with a good educational background and the social support of Buddhism, the new converts especially in urban areas have risen up to become professors, lawyers, journalists, poets and writers, while others have become good parliamentarians and concludes: “They have become capable of asserting their rights. They are now getting organised and consolidated".

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A.R. Vabil (1991:83-84) while making an analytical study of Gandhiji and Ambedkar makes the point that Savarkar tried to create a social atmosphere against the caste system and urged the untouchables to snatch their rights from the upper castes rather than resort to satyagraha. However, Savarkar was rather critical of Buddhism and felt conversion was a useless act as conversion was a false promise as the converts would not achieve substantial.

Tracing the historical antecedents of Buddhism in the historical context in India, from its heights of pristine glory during Asokan times, its fall from grace and its resurgance under Ambedkar's dynamic leadership Dand Pandyan (1996:104) observes that Ambedkar set the wheel of Buddhism in motion with formidable speed.

Ramteke (1983) makes a critical estimate of Buddhism in the twentieth century and observes that neo-Buddhism is based on the old ideals while yet adopting new ones. He feels that this is the only religion which can restore the dignity to the servile classes. Hence the movement has aspects of liberation and well suited for a modern society. He calls it the renaissance of Buddhism. On the basis of personal experience Ramteke calls it a guiding force for the untouchables and the Shudras. It heralds a new era for the oppressed and depressed classes of India because Buddhism has a social message which is fully sensitive. It provides the training for a new life, solves the basic problems of its followers and is alive to the needs of the contemporary situation. It takes care of all the details of human life – physical and mental, individual and collective, material and spiritual (Ibid : 249).

Mttara Shastree (1996) traces the genesis of the neo-Buddhist movement in India. Her basic work is on the life of Neo-Buddhists in
Pune city and observes (Ibid: 143) “In our study we found that the group of Neo-Buddhists after the conversion to Buddhism had reconstructed its conception of itself and it placed itself equal to the upper castes group and higher to the so-called untouchables group”.

Shastree’s study shows that after conversion the respondents in her study intensely disliked being reminded of their former castes such as Mahar, Harijan etc. as they wanted to discard their caste linked identity and wanted to achieve the new identity which would convey a higher status. However, the study also points out that there is still a gap between aspiration and achievement of their goal. The Neo-Buddhists have made an attempt to attain a higher status but in practical life they feel that they have yet to achieve it in a concrete manner. The same feelings were expressed by the neo-Buddhist elites and observed that they sometimes feel that they have only exchanged the label ‘Nava Boudha’ with the old label of ‘Mahar’. Thus caste Hindus have not yet fully shed their discrimination.

A somewhat similar conclusion is drawn in another study conducted earlier by Sunanda Patwardhan (1968). She analyses the situation and comes to the conclusion that conversion to Buddhism has not made any significant changes in the life of the new converts. Neither materially nor socially have the neo-Buddhists achieved anything much. The stigma of untouchability seems to prevail in many places in Maharashtra. In rural areas the untouchability factor still lingers. The powerful landholders of the dominant caste have not allowed the Baluta system to change. Though the “money payment” system has come, the service system has not disappeared. Many women work as labourers with contractors in road and building construction and earn a few rupees. The
men, however are still tied down to agricultural labour and are forced to perform agricultural work. Disobeying leads to violence. Much of the violence in rural Maharashtra is a result of attempts made by the Neo-Buddhists to find new avenues of employment and a better status which is not tolerated by caste Hindus.

Harold Issacs (1965) feels that the main reason as to why untouchables are attracted towards conversion to Islam, Christianity and Buddhism is due to untouchability and oppression by upper caste Hindus. Abject poverty, humiliation and exploitation when they can no longer tolerate the scheduled castes look to other religions with hope for a better life. Thus conversion is an avenue to obtain a new identity, a better life and a method to integrate themselves into the mainstream of social and economic life.

In this context Pratap C. Aggarwal (1983:161) feels that many fell their neighbours and friends that they are Buddhists in order not to be discriminated even if they are not really Buddhists. In this way they try to overcome the stigma of being called Harijans. Aggarwal notes that many of the sweepers who have migrated to New Delhi proclaim that they are Buddhists and by merely asserting themselves to be so they gain a type of self confidence.

Studying the condition of Neo-Buddhists in North India Das D.P. (1985) feels that the conversion to Neo-Buddhism has merely brought about a consenmetic change for the Harijans of north India. He feels that their mind set is still the same as most still demand reservations in colleges and government jobs. He feels that religion has not taught them to lead a new life as per Buddhist principles. Das feels that the neo-
Buddhists should not demand any concessions from government as this wall weaken their determination. Das, himself an ex-Harijan and neo-Buddhist feels that unless the neo-Buddhists had a strict and disciplined life as per the guidelines laid down by Ambedkar they cannot come out of the clutches of the Hindu religion, otherwise he says conversion only becomes a type of new craze.

Owen M. Fynch (1969) observes that Buddhism tried to bridge the gap between Hindu institutions and the social inequality. Thus being a reformant religion it tried to reform the favourable of Hindu social institutions but rejected its internal forms of untouchability, caste system etc. The culturally it is akin to Hinduism but in practice life it is more advanced towards social equality. It become a resurgent religion due to the efforts of Ambedkar. In fact Fynch quotes an educated neo-Buddhist as saying "Dr. Ambedkar was a real Bodhistava. He was the Marten further of Buddhism. He wrote the Bible of Buddhism Fynch says this opinion puts the entire perspective of neo-Buddhism in a new light.

Continuing the same argument Gail Omred (1994:247) feels that Dr. Ambedkar did what Phule and Periyar failed to achieve. He radicalised the Dalits and created a mass movement which brought about a distinct consciousness among them. On the process Ambedkar became an icon to be worshipped, which he himself did not envisage. Hence today most Dalit households have pictures of both Ambedkar and Lord Buddha which are worshipped.

Sunanda Patwardhan (1973:123) in another study of Neo-Buddhists identifies an important aspect of this movement. She observes that Ambedkar provided the most important quality of self-help among
the scheduled castes and to reject the patronage of the upper castes. He cultivated in them the idea of independence, self-respect and motivation to do better without any assistance. He initiated action towards betterment and Buddhism was the ultimate fruit of all such action. It attempted to modernise the untouchables and tried to give them a political consciousness. Thus the Republican Party of India came into existence to fulfill the political aspirations of scheduled castes in general and the neo-Buddhists in particular.

Eleanor Zelloit (1966:191) observes that the type of Neo-Buddhism which came into existence in Maharashtra was an offshoot of the Bhakti movement with the stress on deviation to Buddha and Dr. Ambedkar. Thus neo-Buddhism stressed Bhakti (spiritualism) together with identity (practical) side to the scheduled caste converts.

However, Zelhot also observes that since the attraction towards Buddhism as propagated by Ambedkar was so strong that it led to mass conversion to whom the tenets of Buddhism were new and therefore it was to take a long time before they really understood the basis of the preaching found in Buddhism. The result was that it seemed as of the converts had accepted Buddhism as a matter of convenience and thus they were only pseudo-religious in nature.

In this context Karve and Acharya (1962:130) observe that conversion was only a cosmetre religious change as it did not really bring about a radical change. Untouchability and exploitation still continued with the Mahar as there was no particular improvement in their social or economic status.
A similar conclusion is drawn by R.D. Bhandare (1966:15) who says: “Though they are spiritually charged in mind and manners, no material change is seen in their social status”. Therefore he agrees with many of the other authors, who feel that neo-Buddhism did not bring about far-reacting impact on their lives.

Joseph Methew (1986) says that the neo-Buddhist movement led by Babasaheb Ambedkar was a culmination of several movements started by Mahar leaders in other party of Maharashtra. For example, Mahatma Phule started the Satya Shodhah Samaj to give the Mahars a new identity and a new social identity. Similarly Gopal Baba Walangkar, a retired army officer was the first to speak for the Mahars in 1890. He was followed by Shivaram Janaka Kamble from Poona in 1910. He was educated and found employment in the British government. He tried to create a sense of self respect among the untouchables.

Similarly Kisan Fagoji Bacode was another Mahar leader from Nagpur who preached the preambles of self-respect, individuality and among the Mahars and Mangs. He founded the “Sanmarg Bodhak Nirashrit Samaj” on 1st October 1903 at Moplah, which was his birth place. However Basode was against conversion to any religion his mission was to acquire a better status for the untouchables within the framework of Hinduism. Therefore he called upon his followers not to convert.

The above leaders prepared the ground work for Dr. Ambedkar, as they had already unified the untouchables in Maharashtra. Hence Mathew says that the conversion movement of Ambedkar was the final phase of the Mahar movement. When there were no other avenues
available to acquire a better life Ambedkar was forced to look towards Buddhism. This he formulated the Neo-Buddhist ideology.

Speaking of reservation and conversion, Punekar, Gupta and others (1985) observe that the conversion to Buddhism was the main reason for violence and conflict in rural areas of Maharashtra. The neo-converts began to eschew Hindu festivals and began to observe Buddhist rituals, claimed a better status and stopped doing unclean work. This was done without the concurrence of the Savarna elders who contribute village social life. This generating conflicting between the untouchable converts and the upper castes.

Continuing the idea N.D. Kamble (1983) says that being unable to hear the oppression and violence in rural areas, the neo-Buddhists began to migrate in large numbers to urban areas. This is the reason as to why neo-Buddhists are to be found more in number in cities than in villages.

In conclusion it may be said that the movement towards neo-Buddhism was clearly a movement designed to obtain a new identity, a better status and an acceptance by the society by the lower castes. Some studies show that neo-Buddhism did not make a deep impact on the lives of the ex-untouchables. However, these studies were conducted when the movement was still in its infancy, during the 1950s and 1960's when these who were studied were the first generation converts. They had converted only with the hope of achieving something better. Hence, many did not understand the basics of the new religion they had adopted. However, today new generation of educated Buddhists have come up. They fully understand the basics of the religion. They are urban oriented, .... and are looking to better jobs. Even the villages in India are no longer
as backward as isolated as they were fifty years ago. The winds of social change has brought about socio-cultural and economic changes in rural areas.

Today there is every need to understand and assess the impact of neo-Buddhism on new generation of scheduled castes. Therefore this study is an attempt in that direction.