CHAPTER -II
AMBEDKAR VIEWS ON BUDDHISM

Dr. Bheemarao Ramji Ambedkar (1928-1956) who was fondly revered as 'Baba Saheb' was a veritable saviour for millions of scheduled caste people of India.

Dr. Ambedkar was great social reformer, an educationalist, administrator and a social humanist par excellence. Above all he was a well known constitutionist of world repute. He emerged on the national scene for the cause of the upliftment of the million of weak and downtrodden in order to provide them a better social status, economic justice and political freedom. He thus became a beacon of light for the deprived sections of Indian society who had been deprived of all human rights by age old customs and traditions.

Dr. Ambedkar is often referred to as the last great leader of Indian reformation movement. While he was an anathema for the Hindu orthodox leaders, he was a father figure to his followers. He waged an unrelenting war against Hindu dogma and the evil practice of untouchability. His main goal in life was to restore human rights to the deprived Dalits and lift them out of their miserable existence of poverty which the degrading caste system had consigned them to since centuries. He was firmly of the opinion that unless the weaker sections of society were given their proper share in the development of the nation, there would be neither economic or social justice, nor progress in India.

Dr. Ambedkar strongly believed that the weaker sections of society were the real backbone of India. He was inspired by the vision that true progress of the country would remain only a dream unless and until the
fruits of progress were enjoyed equally by each and every section of society. He was thus a far sighted and great visionary, an emancipator and a great leader. In this context Gandhiji referred to Dr. Ambedkar in his Harijan of July 1936; “A man who has carved for himself a unique position in society. Whatever label he wears in future, Dr. Ambedkar is not the man to allow himself to be forgotten”.

Being born as a Mahar, he himself was a victim of the caste system and the evil practice of untouchability. He therefore rejected the caste system out right and called it the root cause of all evils of Hindu society. Dr. Rajashekariah (1971:14-15) observes, Dr. Ambedkar’s revolt against the Hindu society was in effect a sincere attempt to eradicate the evil caste system itself. Hence emancipation was not just sociological in nature, but it was much deeper, for it had to be eradicated by its roots which had grown in the deeper layers of the Hindu mind.

Ambedkar viewed the caste system as an artificial device which had compartmentalised the population of India into fixed units, each one having prevented from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy (in Indian Antiquary, 1917 : 85). Through this process it had become an integral part of Indian culture. He was aware that the caste system could not be so easily destroyed. Infact, stressing this idea even further John Gunther (1939 : 435-36) observes that “caste is as old as India” and further says : “It is the inner citadel of Hinduism. It is the institution that makes India unique, the device breaking up Indians into fixed categories. Every Hindu is born into a caste and his caste determines his religious, social, economic, domestic life from the cradle to the grave. No man may leaves his caste except when he is expelled. It is impossible to progress from caste to caste”.

14
This idea is very clearly underlined by Dr. Ambedkar in his very first issue of “Mook Nayak” of 31.1.1920 in which he wrote: India is a home of inequality. In order to save the depressed classes from perpetual slavery, poverty and ignorance, herculean efforts must be made (Keer, 1969:41). Thus he established the Jaat-Pat Todak Mandal to eradicate the caste system.

In his war against the caste system, Dr. Ambedkar rightly felt that political freedom was essential for the emancipation of the depressed classes. He pointed out that the untouchables should be given the same political safeguards as those given to other minorities like the Muslims. Otherwise he felt they would not be able to participate in the exercising of political power even if the country obtained freedom from British Rule. He felt that a democratic government in India would still deprive the Dalits of their rights and would remain enslaved and bound by old customs and traditions which would successfully deny them opportunities to come up in life.

In this context he said: “We are often reminded that the problems of the depressed classes is a social problem and that its solution lies elsewhere than in politics. We take strong exception to this view. We hold that the problem of the depressed classes will never be solved unless they get political power in their own hands” (Bhagwan Das: 1977:24).

As a first step to mobilise his people, Ambedkar started the fortnightly called the Mook Nayak in Marathi in January 1920. Through this medium he emphasized the need for creating an awakening among the oppressed classes in his writings. In this Journal he tried to awaken the oppressed classes and to awaken them. He later founded the
Bahiskrit Hitakarani sabha in 1924. The main aim of this institution was to spread education and culture among the untouchable classes and also promote economic advancement. Thus did he attempt to unite them. He later founded the Bahiskrit Hitakarani sabha in 1924. The main aim of this institution was to spread education and culture among the untouchable classes and also promote economic advancement.

In his further efforts to write and awaken his people, Ambedkar launched many satyagrahas. In Mahad he launched a satyagraha in 1927 for the right of the untouchables to draw water from the public tank. In 1930 at Nasik he launched another satyagraha for the entry of the untouchables into Hindu temples. These actions succeeded in uniting thousands of Dalits together to fight for their rights. It succeeded in awakening in them a feeling of strength and a sense of achievement. It helped them to come together to fight against oppression.

In May 1929, Dr. Ambedkar submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission. He brought before the Commission the need for constitutional safeguards for the depressed classes. He forcefully argued that due representation should be given to the depressed classes in the legislature, the executive and public services. Further the 1935 Act, for the first time provided political representation to the scheduled castes, as the depressed classes came to be known according to this Act. Dr. Ambedkar founded a new political party called the Independent Labour Party in 1936 to contest the election in the following year in 1937. He won as many as 13 seats out of the 15 reserved for the scheduled castes in the Bombay Presidency.

In 1942, Dr. Ambedkar founded the All India Scheduled caste Federation. He came to be appointed as labour member in the Governor General's Council. This was a milestone in his political career.
After the end of the II World War, Ambedkar was elected to the assembly in 1946 from Bengal. Prime Minister Nehru appointed him as Minister for Law. Thus he became an important member for framing the new Indian Constitution when India got freedom in 1947.

However, inspite of these great personal achievements, Ambedkar was not happy with the progress he had made for the scheduled castes. He found that at every step he faced stiff opposition. It was almost an imparable task to completely eradicate the evil effects of the caste system. Hinduism and the caste system seemed like the two sides of the same coin. Therefore he began to think of leaving the Hindu religion itself. He started to think of renouncing Hinduism since 1935, but the big question was choosing the most appropriate religion which would guarantee equal rights. Religion, however, he felt was an essential part of life. On this he did not agree with Karl Marx that religion came in the way of social emancipation. For Ambedkar religion was a strategy for social transformation.

In this context it may be noted that Ambedkar lists as many as 25 factors (Vol. 3 p. 442) emphasising the importance of religion in a man's life. While it is not possible to list all of them, a few important ones that may be mentioned here are:

1. Religion is necessary for a free society

2. Religion must relate to facts of life and not to theories and speculations about god, or soul or heaven or earth

3. It is wrong to make god the centre of religion

4. Man and morality must be the centre of religion.
5. The function of religion is to reconstruct the world and to make it happy and not to explain its origin or its end.

6. Unhappiness in the world is due to conflict of interest and the only way to solve conflict is to follow the Ashtanga marga.

7. Private ownership of property brings power to one class and sorrow to another.

8. Nothing is infallible nothing is binding forever. Everything is subject to inquiry and examination.

9. Nothing is permanent or sanathan. Everything is subject to change. Being is always becoming.

The above basic ideas which appealed to Ambedkar as the very essence of a true religion, gradually led him towards Buddhism.

Dr. Ambedkar considered religion as a social force (Dalit Voice, 15 March, 1988). He justified the presence of religion in society as the foundation on which civil government rests. In this context Dr. Ambedkar said “I take religion to mean the propounding of an ideal scheme of divine governance, the aim and object of which is to make the social order in which men live a moral order (ibid).

Dr. Ambedkar was not attracted towards spiritual or the supernatural concept of god. He was totally against the exploitation of the concept of God as ‘Divine power’ to divide society or to sanction evil practices in society. His concept of religion was liberal and intellectual in nature. In this he came very close to J.S. Milli and Edmond-Burke’s ideas of religion. For him a God-based religion often leads to tyranny and was
therefore not acceptable to him. However, unlike many who rejected the very concept of god, Ambedkar did not subscribe to atheism. To him religion was a necessary system of values and the basis of social reconstruction.

In this context Ambedkar said “Some people think that religion is not essential to society, I don’t hold this view, I consider the foundation of religion to be essential to life and practices of life” (Keer, 1969 : 250).

The Dr. Ambedkar’s views on religion was that of a social scientist to him religion was not a path towards salvation, but as the basis of social interaction between people on a basis of equality and social humanism. Faith should kindle morality, kindness and virtue among its people. Hence, Ambedkar looked upon religion as

1. He viewed religion from a cultural dimension as one which fostered good moral values.

2. He viewed religion as a form of Nationalism which gives an identity to its people.

3. He viewed religion as a force which gives a sense of identity to its followers.

It was for these reasons that Ambedkar rejected Hinduism which was full of ancient superstitious practices. While he agreed that Islam, Christianity and Sikkism were more egalitarian, they did not fulfill his criteria of religion. Secondly these religions had absorbed the Hindu caste system into their fold. Thirdly, they were opposed to social reform and were too closely linked to theology. Further due to its too much stress on asceticism and non-materialism he rejected Jainism.
It took Ambedkar nearly 21 years to accept Buddhism because he contemplated on its nature before taking the final decision. He also did not want to thrust it hastily on his followers.

Dr. Ambedkar started his movement of conversion only when he was convinced that Buddhism was the ideal religion and that it would bring about the independent development of the Dalits. He felt that this was the only religion which could develop their personality, give them a better culture and an independent identity free from the oppressive influence of Hinduism. He maintained that Buddhism was based on the principles of liberty, equality and justice. This was his strategy for the emancipation of the scheduled castes.

The Struggle For Equality: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's Views

The Historical background of the neo-Buddhist movement indicates that this movement is basically a status-seeking movement. The main motivation behind the renunciation of Hinduism and conversion to Buddhism was the desire of the so-called untouchables to emancipate themselves and to obtain a better social status in Indian society which had been denied to them from time immemorial (M. Sastree, 1996:142).

The peculiar structural position of the neo-Buddhist group has given rise to its kinds of consequences. The first was militant movement called "Dalit Sahitya" which was a literary movement and the second was the movement towards Buddhism which was a peaceful one. In these two movements one finds the outlet for the expression of the utter frustration, discontent of the neo-Buddhists (Ibid:149). This consciousness of their plight has given rise to a radical and rebellious attitude among
the Dalits. The Dalit Panthers have attempted to implement the revolutionary approach, upon the dominant group in order to redefine their social position. Even their agitation for renaming the Marathwada University after Dr. B.R. Ambedkar should be viewed as an attempt to raise their social position. Therefore an attempt is made here to give certain important details of events earlier mentioned.

In order to improve their status the low castes have adopted certain values of the higher castes. Richard Lambert adds to the usual list of such values, like cleanliness, literacy, economic political power, one more value viz., the value of sharing in and contributing to the mainstream of cultural accomplishments. The neo-Budhists are attempting to claim such achievement through Ambedkar as a national figure with whom they identify themselves.

This conversion to Budhism, which was inspired by the decisive, action and the message of Dr. B.A. Ambedkar, who renounced Hinduism and embraced Buddhism, called it the Neo-Budhist Movement in India and the new convert came to be called the Neo-Budhists. To understand the historic and revolutionary step taken by Dr. Ambedkar, it is necessary to have a brief historical account of the whole movement for the liberation of untouchables in India.

Social stratification, social inequality is a universal phenomenon, but the Indian caste system, along with its added dimension of the practice of untouchability based on the concept of pollution has been unique in certain fundamental ways. Hindu religious and cultural values have sanctioned the principle and practice of untouchability, a system perhaps unknown in any other part of the world. As Dumount and
Pocock point out the social relations governed by the fear of pollution and hereditary specialization, hierarchical organisation and reciprocal repulsion have lent uniqueness to the caste system. The disabilities which untouchables suffered were numerous and severe.

The so-called untouchables, touch, shadow and some times even their voice were deemed by the caste Hindus to be polluting. They were forbidden to keep certain domestic animals, to use certain metals for ornaments; where obliged to wear a particular type of dress, to eat a particular type of food, to use a particular type of foot wear. They were forced to occupy the dirty, dingy, insanitary and miserable shanties or cottages in the outskirts of villages and towns. Though these untouchables worshipped the gods of the Hindus and observed the same festivals, the Hindu temples were closed to them and the service of Brahmin priests were denied to them. Barbers and washermen refused to render them service. They did not have access to public road, schools and wells. The untouchables were treated by the caste Hindus as sub-humans, less than men and often treated them worse than beasts. Their miseries did not end at this. They had to follow the hereditary occupations, which were considered inferior, menial and polluting. Such occupations not only added to their degraded status, but also their miserable poverty. Thus these people were deprived of social economic, religious and civic rights.

The worst part of the situation was that they had no chance of bettering their conditions. The Hindu religious doctrines of 'Karma' and 'Rebirth' which the Brahmins used as a weapons to suppress these people, preached them to 'do their duty' and undergo all the sufferings without any grumbling. Their present life was supposed to be the result
of their 'Karma' or deeds in the previous births and as their good or bad life situations in the next birth supposed to be depended upon their Karmas in the present birth, the untouchables were consigned to a life full of misery. In short as Dr. Ambedkar (1948:14) writes, they are born impure, they are impure while they live, they have the death impure and they give birth to children who are born with the stigma of untouchability as fixed to them”.

This destructive system has not gone unchallenged. Many leaders in India have, from generation to generation, made sincere attempts to free Hindu society from the evils of the caste system. Five hundred years before the Birth of Christ, the Budha shook this system to its foundations. For a considerable period of time even the untouchables were initiated into his new religion. In the eleventh century Ramanuja and afterwards Basava tried to reform this system.

In the succeeding centuries several saints like Chakradhar, Ramanand, Kabir, Chaitanya, Eknath, Tukaram, Rohidas and Chokhamel have tried to bring about equality in their 'Bahakti' cult. However the movement of saints was mainly religious and tried to bring in the spiritual elevation of the shudras. But, they did not touch the fundamental problems of social and economic life of the untouchables.

Till the advent of the western impact, the caste system did not change substantially. According to O'Malley (1941:15) during the British period two factors made a deep impact on the caste system. This really helped to bring about an awakening and a social upheavel in the system. The new ideology of liberalism, individualism and egalitarianism, which came from the West, started making in roads into the traditional matrix
of the Indian value system and its institutional expression. Secondly, the British administration, with its stress on equality of all before law, its system of bureaucracy, and the introduction of science and technology, the development of communication and the spread of English education created the necessary intellectual and psychological climate for the emergence of a new and vigorous social reform movement. Though there were anti-British feelings, the educated middle class at least appreciated and acknowledge the British influence. There was a double impact on the minds of intellectuals. On the one hand English language opened a new world of thought to them and made them uneasy of the evil social customs in their own society. On the other, the Christian missionaries were attacking the various evil social customs like caste system, idol worship, etc., in order to convert Hindus to their religion. This criticism aroused a measure of defensive reaction among the intellectuals in India. They felt that they should make efforts to strengthen Hinduism against the criticism of missionaries and to prevent the Hindu society from the danger of conversion of Hindus, particularly the poor, suppressed and oppressed to Christianity.

As M.N. Srinivas (1956:73) points out it brought about a two fold movement of 'Sanskritisation', and 'westernisation'. While the lower castes imitated many of their customs of maintaining ritual purity in their daily life, the Brahmins themselves began to imitate the British and became exposed to a western life style.

The socio-religious revival movement initiated by Raja Ram Mohan Roy under the name of Barahmo Samaj was one such which took its birth in Bengal. Another reformist movement called Arya Samaj movement was started in the Punjab. In Maharashtra too social reformers like Jambekar, Lokahitavedi G.H. Deshmukh, Ranade,
Mahatma Pule, Agarkar, Bhandarbar etc. fought for justice and equality. Among them, the most important role was played by Mahatma Phule. Although insulted and ridiculed at the outset by reactionaries and relatives, Phule and his wife served the cause of the untouchables. They strove to spread education and emancipation among the untouchables.

A few decades later the reform movement was carried forward by the depressed class mission society of India. It held its first All India Depressed Classes Conference in 1918, in Bombay. It was attended by prominent Indian celebrities such as Vitthal Bhai Patel, Bipin Chandar Pal, Tilak, Khaparde and A.V. Thakkar (Keer, 1971:37). At the conclusion of the conference there came out an All India Anti-untouchability Manifesto signed by most of the prominent leaders to the effect that they would not observe untouchability in their everyday affairs.

If we look at these various attempts made to bring about social equality until this time, we can identify two distinct social groups. One movement came from the Brahmins themselves while the other was form the Non-Brahmins. But the Brahmin leadership failed essentially to initiate a radical change within their own community. It failed to loosen its traditionalism and orthodoxy; nor did it succeed in creating a confidence about its intentions in the non-Brahmin castes and satisfy the newly emerging leadership from amongst untouchables (Ibid: 34). The confrontation between these two reform movements, however created a climate of social change. Unfortunately they failed to come to terms with the basic problem of the untouchables who did not benefit from it in any substantial way.

**Dr. Ambedkar and his movements**

The untouchables found their truly great saviour in Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. Born in an untouchable family, Ambedkar himself
suffered terribly at the hands of social evils like caste and untouchability. He was denied human rights in social relationship. He felt the pangs of untouchability as much as his caste-fellows and understood what it meant to be an untouchables. Ambedkar was born in the Mahar caste which is the largest of the untouchable castes in the area now called state of Maharashtra, where this group constitutes about 10 per cent of the population.

Ambedkar’s contribution was to raise the earlier attempts to a level of effectiveness and the movement of untouchables got a new shape and style under his leadership. He gave the untouchables a leadership which they sadly lacked and which was badly needed. He placed the problem of the Harijans before the country in its true perspective: political, social and economic. By this time the untouchables had developed a sense of helplessness. Ambedkar successfully supplied them the missing quality of self-help. He always said that the demands of untouchables should be conceded as their birth right and not be handed out of pity. They were not beggars seeking alms. They were asking what was rightfully theirs. Ambedkar hated pity from the higher castes. His view was that the untouchables should be self-enlightened. They ought not to be dependent on others. For the first time he gave the untouchables the type of leadership that developed self-confidence in the hearts of thousands of untouchables. It kindled in them an ability to fight in an organized way. They started looking up to Ambedkar with faith and adoration (Ibid, 1971: 11, 12).

As Ambedkar, was born as an untouchable he had to face several traumatic experiences since the early years of his life. The first such rude and shattering which he experienced was he was still young when he and
his elder brother where thrown out of the bullock cart by a god fearing caste Hindu cartman. That was the day he knew that he belonged to a family of untouchables. It was his first experience with untouchables when many such insults followed in his life later. He was denied the learning of Sanskrit when he was in school. The climax of humiliations was reached at Baroda after his return from USA. He was refused drinking water by the services of caste-Hindu peons in his office. He was also denied a shelter in the city of Baroda. This proved the fact that even with his personal attainment, it could not soften the prejudices of the caste Hindus. Ambedkar was terribly grieved at such incidents. At the same time he began to observing and understand the grievances of the untouchable community as a whole.

Ambedkar started his public life in 1918. The Southborough committee, which was dealing with the franchise in the light of the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms began to examine representatives with different interests. At this time Ambedkar demanded a separate electorate. He demanded that there should be reserved seats for the depressed classes in proportion to their population. The view he cultivated on the demand for Home Rule can be easily understood from a letter which he wrote at that time to the Times of India, Bombay. He observed that before demanding Home Rule it was the duty of the advanced classes to put the lower and depressed on a level social equality. He observed that Home Rule was as much the birth right of a Mahar as that of a Brahmin. The first duty he said was for the advanced classes to educated, enlighten and elevate them. Unless and until such an attitude was understood and adopted, the day on which India would have Home Rule would be a distant dream.

27
A movementous event of this time was a march in the town of Mahad in 1927. Taking cognisance of the resolution of the Mahad Municipality which had in 1924 declared to have thrown open its tank to the depressed classes, it was now decided to draw water from the tank in order to establish the right of the untouchables. Thousands of untouchables responded to Ambedkar's call. They gathered at Mahed while Ambedkar took water from tank and drank it. Thousands of untouchables then followed him. The orthodox and reactionary Hindus of Mahad afterwards purified the "chowdar" tank. The news of the so-called purification of the tank made Ambedkar indignant. He decided to launch a Satyagrah or struggle for the vindication of his people' rights. Accordingly, a conference was held at Mahad. The result was the very explosive action of the burning of the Manusmriti. The holy and revered scripture of Hindus, and the "symbol of Inequality, cruelty and injustice" from the point of view of the Depressed Classes was publicly burnt. It was followed by a court injunction, which prohibited any further Satyagraha for water rights. He fought the case in the court, which ultimately won. The struggle at Mahad was not for the water of the Tank as such but was mainly to establish equal human rights. It was an experiment to test the Hindu mind.

Another important experiment was in the form of the famous Temple entry satyagrah at the Kala Ram temple at Nasik in March, 1930. It was organised by Ambedkar and the local Mahar leaders. Thousands of untouchables gathered and participated in it. Before the March to the temple started, Ambedkar addressed a meeting in which he clearly explained the intention behind launching such a satyagrah. He said, "this satyagrah is a challenge to the Hindu mind. Since hundreds of years,
the upper caste Hindus have been denying us human rights. To treat a human being as human being is the new ideology of the new age and whether the Hindus are ready to accept this or not is the real test of their mind and today by the way of this satyagrah, we will get the answer for that” (kharat, 1966:23).

Ambedkar gave the liberation movement of the untouchables an organisation, a definite direction and an appropriate ideological platform which was necessary for a revolution. The “Declaration of Fundamental Rights” which he issued at the Round Table Conference (1930) accelerated the speed of the movement. The British Government had convened a Round Table Conference to frame a constitution for India with a view of satisfy the demands of the people of India. In the Conference Dr. Ambedkar, along with Rao Bahadur Srinivasan represented in Depressed classes. In the very first meeting of the Conference held in November 1930, Ambedkar asserted that none can remove their grievance and that the Depressed classes would need political rights to solve their own problems. At the time of this conference, he issued a statement on the declaration of fundamental rights. He demanded adequate representation in the legislatures and the right to elect their own men as their representatives by having a separating electorate. He also demanded an adequate representation of the depressed classes in the Government service (Ambedkar, 1943:31-36).

At the second Round Table Conference in 1931, Ambedkar confronted Gandhi, who not only refused to consider separate electorates for the depressed classes but also opposed any form of special representation involving reserved seats. After the third Round Table
Conference, the British government announced a decision in 1932 which came in the form of the Communal Award. This award gave the depressed classes a double vote one in the special constituency for a modest number of reserved seat and the other in the general electorate. Gandhi opposed this again and to show his disapproval entered a fast unto death. Through Ambedkar was firm about his views regarding the need for a separate electorate for the untouchables, he had compromise that, Gandhi and Ambedkar ultimately arrived at a solution and signed the Poona Pact in 1932. In this new arrangement the caste Hindus had to grant 148 seats to the depressed classes, instated of the 71 seats which the Communal Award had granted. However, Ambedkar's attempts at securing separate a electorate for the depressed class was frustrated.

If one looks at the various attempts Ambedkar made so far to achieve his goal, both political and social equality for his people, it seems that their were some shifts in his strategy as the situation demanded. Since the early 1920s he was warning the untouchables that they must cleanse their evil habits. He had been advocating the abandonment of customs and practices associated with the stereotype of the untouchable, including the consumption of alcoholic beverages and carrion beef. In this early period of his movement in his efforts at "Sankritization' he was asking the untouchables also to imitate the high caste Hindu rituals. He gave very much importance to the Vedic style of weddings, wearing and the of the sacred thread. However, Ambedkar soon found that such efforts to emulate the upper caste rituals and practices had little effect on the attitude of others. From 1927 onwards Ambedkar helped to organise campaigns in order to force the opening of Hindu temples to the
untouchables. But this also was proving to be ineffective. From 1930 onwards he dropped most of his such previous innovations and concentrated on gaining political power, because he felt political power could restore the untouchables their rights and achieve a better place in the country.

Of course, his emphasis on the need to live clean and moral lives always continued. He insisted that by changing their mode of life, they would become fit for respect and friendship. Ambedkar was always conscious of the backwardness of his people in education. So he tried every possible means to disseminate education among his people. He started hostels and established the Depressed Classes Education Society of organise school education for his community on a sound basis. He always aspired to produce highly educated men, capable of raising the images of the untouchables through their ability. Ambedkar wanted to bring the untouchables from a state of “Dehumanization* and “slavery* into one of equality through the use of modern methods based on education and the exercise of legal and political rights (Ibid : 31,36).

In addition, Ambedkar, at this stage wanted to provision of “separate settlements* for the untouchables. He contended that it was the village system of Hindu society, which strengthened and perpetuated the system of untouchability. He advocated the establishment of separate villages, meant exclusively for the untouchables. Only in that case, he thought, would the distinction of the *high* and *low* of the *touchable* and *untouchable* vanish. The move for *separate electorate* and *separate settlement* was fully opposed by Gandhi and his followers. They thought that it would create a deep division in Hindu society and religion.
Various plans of social and political reforms as proposed by Ambedkar did not seem to reach the level of success he desired. This evoked in him an intense feeling of revolt against the Hindu social order. He had to fight all the way to securing his people even ordinary human rights. When all attempts failed, he eventually started thinking of renouncing Hinduism. At Jalgaon, in 1929, he advised the untouchables to embrace any other religion that would regarded them as human beings and would give them an equal opportunity to rise up in the world. Consequently a few untouchables thought of embracing Islam. However, when a group of untouchables from a village near Nasik decided to embrace Islam. Ambedkar advised them to wait for some more time and see whether they could still find a place in Hinduism without taking such an extreme step.

The real and substantial progress came at the conference met at Yeola a town near Nasik in 1953. At this conference which was convened by the leaders of the depressed classes they reviewed the political and social situation in the light of their ten years struggle. They drew plans to initiate further action. The conference was attended by thousands of untouchables from distant places. Dr. Ambedkar recounted the plight of the depressed classes in all spheres. Such as economic, social, educational and political spheres. He pointed out the immense sacrifices made by them to secure the barest human rights while yet living under the aegis of Hinduism. He said that inspite of the time and money spent, the efforts made to achieve the objectives of human rights and equal status in Hindu society had proved utterly fruitless. He, therefore expressed his opinion that the time for making a final decision to settle the matter had arrived. He then exhorted them serve their connections
with Hinduism and seek solace and self respect in any another religion. He warned them to be very careful in choosing the new faith and to see the equality of treatment, status and opportunities was guaranteed to them without any reservation.

Referring to his personal decision in the matter of converting he said that unfortunately for him he was born a Hindu untouchable. However, he declared that it was well within his power to refuse to live under the existing humiliating conditions and so he said, “I solemnly assure you that I will not die a Hindu”.

**Period after 1935**

The announcement of Ambedkar regarding renouncing of Hindu religion produced widespread repercussions. At this juncture as Patwardhan (1965:131) points out one important issue becoming clear and that was that chairman and another backward class in Maharashtra, began gradually drift away from Ambedkar on this issue of conversion. Excepting leaders of the Mahar caste, leaders of most of the other untouchable castes showed their unmistakable disapproval of Ambedkar’s move. They did not approve of converting to another religion. They still felt that reform could be initiated within the Hindu religion and were not ready to take an extreme step as Ambedkar.

Ambedkar was not satisfied with the response he got at the Maharashtra untouchable youth conference held at Poona. In order have an estimation of the real support from his people for the conversion movement. Ambedkar held a conference of his own Mahar caste people in May 1936 at Bombay. Giving his reason for this exclusively Mahar
conference while his call for conversion was for all touchable, he said, “in this conference, we are not going to make any demands, either from the government or from the Hindus. What should we do with our lives, how we should shape them are the only issue before this conference. This question has to be decided individually and settled by each caste independently. That would be better. So I have not invited all the untouchables together”. In this statement the words “each caste independently” which he used indicates very clearly that his approach was particularistic in nature. This call for religious conversion could not cross the caste boundaries. He had to rely only on caste loyalties and it seems he accepted this limitation. Ambedkar was not successful in uniting all the untouchable communities of the country nor did all the untouchables communities of Maharashtra come under one banner. Ambedkar himself was aware of this. He said, “even if I had called an all untouchables conference only representatives from each community would have come, where as I want to assess the public pulse regarding the issue. I have called only the Mahras but the other untouchables do not loose any thing. I request the other untouchable communities to assess the pulse of their brothers (Kharat : 1966-204). This statement shows that he knew that his approach was particularistic but he bowed to the compulsions of social forces and structural constraints.

At this conference, Ambedkar exposed his views regarding the need of conversion. He observed that the main aim of the movement of eradication of untouchability was to give the untouchables social freedom and this freedom could not be achieved except by way of conversion. He said, the untouchables need equality. There are two ways of getting equality he observed. To achieve this equality by remaining in the Hindu
fold or to achieve it by conversion. By remaining in the Hindu fold equality could not be achieved, just by eradication of the concept of pollution. This in itself was not a significant process. If inter dining and intermarrying becomes a practice only then equality could be achieved. This could only be achieved by the destruction of the law of ‘Chturvarna’ and Brahminism, only then could the untouchables find a place of dignity within the Hindu fold. But he questioned within this could be achieved at all.

As for himself, Ambedkar observed vehemently, “I have decided once for all to give up this religion. My religious conversion is not inspired by any material motive. There is hardly anything that I cannot achieve even while remaining an untouchables. There is no other feeling than that of spiritual feeling underlying my religious conversion. In your case change of religion imperative for worldly as well as spirituals ends. Why should you live under the fold of that religion which they could not get by remaining untouchable Hindus”. He felt the Hindu society cannot be reformed. This indicates that he guided his men to the path of conversion mainly for the worldly human rights which the Hindu religion cannot be truly humanist. Hinduism cannot be changed but it can only be renounced. So Ambedkar chose the way of religious conversion to relieve the suffering of his followers.

After giving the call for conversion and after assessing the pulse of his followers, there started a new phase in the life of Ambedkar’s and in his movement for the liberation of the untouchables. This phase is the long period of preparation for the ultimate action of conversion.

Though he had made the declaration about his determination to renounce Hinduism, he had avoided declaring the religion, which would
be embraced. The leaders of various religions like Islam, Sikhism, Christinity, Budhism started pressing Ambedkar to embrace their own religion and win equality and freedom. Having resolved to renounce Hinduism, Ambedkar pursued his search for a religious framework within which the untouchables could find equal status and would be able to participate meaningfully in the political life of the country. He thus embarked on a comparative study of all the religions of India (Wilkinson and Thomas, 1972:54).

Dr. Ambedkar made a thorough and systematic study of Islam as an egalitarian religion, but he rejected it as he found that it was not suited for the scheduled castes. He noted that there existed inequality even in this religion and the newly made converts took with them their original caste based status. Hence, it would only be a change in religion but would in no way enhance the status of the untouchables. He further pointed out that women were subjected to the ‘purdah’ system and this amounted to the suppression of women’s freedom. He also noted that the people were dogmatic and not amenable to reform and change. He concluded: “It has become a habit with the scheduled castes to look upon Muslims as their friends simply because they dislike Hindus. This is a mistaken view” (quoted, Ahir, 1996:40). He observed that conversion to Islam should be a last resort.

In the above context Ahir (Ibid : 44-45) points out certain reasons for Dr. Ambedkar’s reasons for rejecting Islam.

1. He was not willing to go out of the basic Indian culture

2. Conversion to Islam would denationalise the scheduled castes
3. Muslims in India too observe the caste systems

4. Many muslims also observe untouchability

5. Muslim society has many evils as Hindu society

6. Subjections of Purda system on women making them helpless

7. It is a closed society which is averse to reform.

During the early period his contemplation to change his religion, Ambedkar was at the outset deeply attracted towards Sikhism. The move for conversion to Sikhism also had won the approval of some prominent Hindus like Dr. Munje of Hindu Mahasabha and even the Shankaracharya Dr. Kurukotii. However, these early leanings towards Sikhism later disappeared. His evaluation of Islam was also negative. For almost the same reason he rejected Sikhism as he found that untouchability was practiced in the Punjab by the Sikhs and the Jats.

D.C. Ahir (1995:24) in assessing Dr. Ambedkar's views on Christianity notes that he was more an admires of Christianity unlike Islam which he detested. However, much he admired the broad scientific western outlook of Christianity its self sacrificing nature, the hard work done by Christian missionaries in India to spread rational-scientific education and their work for the poor and the down-trodden, he was not convinced that Christianity would ultimately eradicate untouchability and would offer the scheduled castes a higher status.

In his comparative study of all religions, Ambedkar confessed that only two personalities – Buddha and Christ-captivated him. He was aware of the Christian contribution to the world. He was in search of a
religion which preached equality, fraternity and liberty. However, Ambedkar found that in India, Christianity worked along the existing grooves of caste system and was split into denominations. Besides, Ambedkar thought that conversion to Christianity or Islam would denationalise the Depressed classes and it would send them out of Hindu culture. Jainism, he thought, was not a powerful religion and its preaching of extreme “Ashimsa” (non-violence) was unacceptable. Thus Ambedkar critically evaluated various religions because he wanted to have a permanent answer to the complex problems of the untouchables.

He took into consideration certain “isms” too. The path of communism also he observed could not give desired extent of liberation to the oppressed untouchables. Ambedkar, had the broad and total perception and the comprehension of the problems of the untouchables. He did not consider communism as having the correct basic approach to solve the problems of the socially and religiously disinherited and down-trodden people of India. Further, Ambedkar was always of the view that social and human reconstruction needed a religious basis while communism did not recognise the existence of any religion and even denounced it as ameril.

As may be ascertained form his writings, Dr. Ambedkar’s first consideration was the eradication of the pernicious custom of untouchability. He felt that other than Hinduism in which this was in built, the scheduled caste must choose a religion which would treat them as equals and would thus offer them a better status in the social hierarchy. Hence he clearly announced: “reforming Hindu society is neither our aim nor our field of action. Our aim is to gain freedom. We
are not interested in anything else at the moment. If we can gain freedom by conversion, why should we shoulder the responsibility of the reform of Hindu religion“. (quoted, Balley, 1981:43).

Answering the question why conversion was the only way out, Dr. Ambedkar (1987:20-22) observed “The Hindu religion does not appeal to my conscience. It does not appeal to my self respect. I tell you very specifically religion is for man and not man for religion. To get human treatment, convert yourselves”. He further said “Convert for getting organised, convert for becoming strong, convert for securing equality, convert for getting liberty, convert so that your domestic life may he happy”. He felt that as a leader of the scheduled castes it was his duty to show the correct path and tell them what was good for them.

Ruling out all other systems of faith and the ideology, Ambedkar’s ultimate choice fell on Buddhism. Ambedkar made his position clear regarding the excellence of Buddhism over all other religions very clear since the year 1950. He observed at Colombo in June 1950 that there was no possibility of emancipation for the untouchables within the Hindu social system and stated “I have now come to the unshakable conclusion and that decision is irrevocable. This is, the untouchables have no other ways of liberation than the Buddha dharma. It is only in the Buddhist dharma that the untouchables have a permanent answer”.

In attempting to assess and understand Dr. Ambedkar’s various for being attracted towards Budhism, Aher “How and why Buddhism deliveved in India (1996 : 9&10) notes that : “The Budha revolted against such oppressive social laws and condemned the caste system. He challenged the devine origin of the caste and showed the hollowness of
the claim of the Brahmins of having been born from the month of Brahma...". Ahir has identified certain specific reasons for the decline of Buddhism in India notably the lack of necessary zeal of the Buddhist monks, the lack of distinct and specific social and religious customs, rites and rituals and the conclusion of Hindu gods and goddesses in the Buddhists pantheon. Ultimately Hinduism absorbed some of the marked social reforms of Lord Buddha into itself and attempted to absorb the new religion into the Hindu fold by taking over Buddhist temples. Dr. Ambedkar wanted to revive this religion in its former glory and give it back its separate identity.

In a similar context Ahir in “India’s Dept to Buddhism” (1996:60) reinforces Dr. Ambedkar’s views. He observes that though Buddhism has declined it has nevertheless left an indelible make an Indian history and culture. He highlights the fact that Buddhism preached that individuals worth and not his birth was important (Ibid : 72,73). It preached equality, Ahimsa, attracted Dr. Ambedkar towards Buddhism and that was the reason why he selected it as the most appropriate religion for his followers.

After making a decision to embrace Buddhism, Ambedkar, then stepped up his campaign for the propagation of Buddhism. He prepared a formula of certain rites called the “Dhamma Disha Ceremony” as he thought that there should be a formal ceremony for initiation into the “Dhamma” (Buddhist-religion). In the early part of 1956, he almost completed his great book on the Buddha and Buddhism which he had started writing in November 1951. He declared in Bombay, on the day of Buddha Jayanti celebrations, that he would embrace Buddhism in October of the same year. On this occasion he not only made the
declaration of his own decision to convert, but also very openly stated that his people were his sheep and he was their shepherd. Hence, there was no theologian as great as he and that they should follow him and would get enlightenment gradually. He made an announcement in the Press that his conversion to Buddhism would take place at Nagpur on the “Dassara” day, October 14, 1956.

On the day before the conversion, Ambedkar made it clear to the newsmen that his Buddhism would strictly follow the tenants of the old faith as preached by Lord Buddha himself. It would not his people in differences which had arisen on account of Hinayana and Mahayana. His Buddhism would therefore be a sort of Neo-Buddhism, or Navayana. Thus was the term ‘Neo-Buddhism’ came to the first used.

On the 14th October, 1956, Ambedkar took his ‘Diksha’ at Nagpur from one of the oldest Buddhist monks in India. He declared that by discarding the ancient Hindu religion which stood for inequality and oppression he was been reborn on that day. Then he repeated the pledges or a series of rows, which were twenty two in number, which he himself had specially framed to be administered at the time of “Dhamma Diksha Ceremony”, apart from the customary rituals. He denounced Hinduism and finally embraced Buddhism.

When Ambedkar converted to Buddhism in 1956 it appears that the large numbers of scheduled castes who converted with him in the first phase were the Mahars of Maharashtra, the sub caste to which Ambedkar himself belonged. Most of them were Marati speaking. This was because the movement had yet to gain popularity and wide acceptance in other parts of the country.
Dr. Ambedkar was prudent and far-sighted. There was a particular reason as to why he chose Buddhism over other religions. Firstly Ambedkar realised that Buddhism was a part of the larger Indian culture without its evil customs. Hence those who converted to Buddhism could still live within the Indian culture peacefully and exist with the majority of the Hindus of the country. Secondly, Buddhism was an Indian religion which had taken its birth and roots in this country. It was therefore not an alien religion, which had come to India from a foreign country.

Thirdly, Buddhism offered to Dalits a better status as it was an egalitarian religion which condemned untouchability and would give them a new identity.

Lastly all Dalits would remain united under one religion. In this context Dr. Lokhande (1982:57) observes: “Ambedkar persistently laboured to locate the cohesive factors conducive to the creation of an integrated society based on an associated mode of life”.

Therefore he saw Buddhism as an alternative religion and said: “I am born a Hindu, but will not die a Hindu”. He denounced Hinduism for its evil practices and said “The socio-religion disabilities have dehumanised the untouchables, and their interests are at stake and therefore the interest of humanity” (Mangudkar, 1976:13). Thus he said underlining the need for an alternate religion: “I take religion to mean the propounding of an ideal scheme of divine governance, the aim and object of which is to make the social order in which men live a moral orders” (Dalit Voice, 15 March, 1988).

Dr. Ambedkar further identifies how he choose the alternative religion. (1) The first dimension is to know the basis of the religion (2) the
second is to understand its ideals (3) and the third dimension is properly judging its values. Thus Buddhism was a religion of a civilized society which gave importance to moral and social dimensions than on religiosity. It was an ideal religion for social and moral reconstruction. It was essentially based on liberty, equality and fraternity, because it was not based on “hereditary division of labour” as in Hinduism. It did not sanction discrimination based on work. Buddhism contributed to a free social order which brought about the development of the individual and did not suppress his aspirations.

**Buddhism and Neo-Buddhism**

When Dr. Ambedkar chose Buddhism for his followers he did not get involved in the controversy of Hinayana and Mahayana branches. He concentrated on the broad tenets of this religion as based on Trisharan, that is the concept of (a) Reason (b) equality and (c) compassion. He highlighted the basic quality of Pradnya, Samata and Karuna which appealed to him most. He saw in Buddhist Dhamma a rejection of the principle of karma as in Hinduism.

Dr. Ambedkar made a thorough and systematic study of Buddhism and propagated it in his books. “The Budha and His Dharma” and “The Budha and the Future of His religion”. These two books bring out the essence of Buddhism as Dr. Ambedkar saw it. The Buddhism as profounded and interpreted by Ambedkar came to the generally identified as Neo-Buddhism.

Ambedkar called Buddhism as Anthropo centric religion, which did not believe that God created man. Hence man is ‘An –atta’ or one who
has an impersonal soul, that is one without eternal soul, but one who has a mind: He is therefore a 'Nama-Rupa' who is composed of mental elements (Nama-khamda) and physical elements (Rupa khamda) such as earth, fire, air and water. Thus he possesses (a) vedna = sensation (b) sanna-perception and (c) samkhara = disposition.

Awareness in the mind is central to human development. He is therefore a sentient being. Consciousness was the core of this religion. Birth was the beginning and death was the end of man. He had no soul for re-birth. Man is therefore dynamic and lead to re-birth of elements by regeneration of matter. Transmigration of the soul was a superstition which is an enemy of Samma Ditthi (Right view).

Man can progress in his life on the basis of (a) Moral orders – Ahimsa or non violence against all living things and (b) spiritual values or Dhamma. Mans' action was Kamma and kamma-Niyama was the basis of a good moral order based on discipline and duty. Therefore, Ambedkar stated "The effect of the moral order followed the deed as night follows the day". Hence fortune and misfortune is the result of deeds. A man's destiny was one of his own creation and was based on his own Kamma or deeds. The repercussion of his deeds were:

1. Dittha Dhamma Kamma – having immediate effect
2. Upabhajjavedaniya Kamma-having remote effect
3. Aporapariya kamma – having indefinite effect.

A man should be moral not out of fear of God or to please god but as a moral responsibility to himself and the society in which he is born.
Therefore, it stressed social humanism and a moral order to sustain social organisation. The moral order further consisted of:

a. Protection of the weak: In a civilized society the strong should be protectors of the weaker sections of society and only then the moral order can sustains itself. The strong should exercise restraint, benevolence and morality.

b. Common good: Such basic feelings as jealousy, greed, hatred lead to a disorganised society. It leads often to double standards of morality, one for the strong and another for the weak. Irrational claims lead to conflict. Universal morality leads to a functional society.

c. Safeguards for the growth of individual: Equal opportunity for all to develop personal ability, capacity and aspirations. It should lead to fraternity based on brotherhood of men.

Thus Ambedkar pointed out that man is responsible not only to himself but also for others. Man should not be fatalistic and should not behave in the Philosophy of Pre-determinism. Such beliefs he called as "unlettered barbarism". One's poverty is due to one's own lack of activity and not because of karma, he observed.

Ahimsa: The second component was the stress on nonviolence. It is based on the principle of Karma or blindness and Maitri (love and friendship). Here Dr. Ambedkar reinterprets Ahimsa not according to the Jaina principles. For example, Ambedkar says that the Budha had no objection to eat meat if it was offered as alms and so long as he himself did not kill it. He used Ahimsa in its broad perspective and in a rational way. He said "love all so that you may not want to kill any, dry up the kill to bill through love".
Spiritual values: The third important component was spiritual values (1) Dhamma (ii) Adhamma (iii) Saddhamma.

(i) Dhamma: leading a pure life, purity of body, speech and mind rejection of falsehood, idleness and talk.

Thus to become a Bodhisatva through leading a life of purity on 'Nibbana'.

ii. Adhamma: belief in spiritual life, belief in god and soul belief in speculative.

iii. Saddhamma: Clear mind, pure thought, cultivating pure virtues.

From the above it is evident that Dr. Ambedkar stressed on the practical side rather than the spiritual. Thus his view came to be known as Neo-buddhism. He highlighted the central idea of an organised society between the Bhikku and the Sangha and the followers of the religion. A Bhikku is not a priest or a middle man, but one who spreads the ideals of the religion. He is a true missionary who leads a strict life (Ibid. p. 460). He should encourage Vinaya or sacred duties.

Dr. Ambedkar outlines the Vinayas for the householder, for husband and wife, for children, for girls, for master and servants and finally vinayas for students.

Buddhism teaches that man cannot live in isolation, because man is social by nature. Dr. Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism brings in the elements of socialism as viewed by Marx, that is work for the common mass and its welfare. This he has clearly pointed out in "Buddha and Karl Marx". He rejected Manu.
It took Dr. Ambedkar nearly 21 years to finally make up his mind. He decided to leave Hinduism in 1935 at Yeola. He attended a Buddhist conference in 1945 at Ahmedabad and later the World Federation of Buddhists at Rangoon. He started the Siddhartha college in 1946. He actively participated in a Buddhist procession in Bombay and finally made up his mind in 1955. However, he waited until 1956 to make an official statement because it was the 2500 University of Budha. On 14th October, 1956 he gave the call at Nagpur for celebrating the Dhamma Chakra Parivantan Divas or Conversion Day. Nagpur came to be called Diksha Bhoomi where thousands followed him by taking up Buddhism.