Chapter II

AMBEDKAR’S CRITIQUE OF HINDUISM
Ambedkar’s Critique of Hinduism

This chapter examines Ambedkar’s critique of attempts to reform Hinduism. It shows how reform and revivalist movements failed to address the basic problem of caste prejudice. According to Ambedkar, Hinduism institutionalizes caste hierarchy. Hence he argues that instead of reforming it needs to be rejected. The chapter shows how Ambedkar being a rationalist thinker questioned the traditional social order of the Hindu society in order to build a just and egalitarian society. His ideas, ideals and philosophy revolved around the welfare of humans which was to be achieved through social and political means. He fought against social and political injustices throughout his life and could emerge successful to a considerable extent. His struggle was to consolidate Dalits and to make them aware that they too are human beings and have the right to lead a happy life in society. The chapter details Ambedkar’s critique of Hinduism as inherently bound to caste and inegalitarianism. The chapter is also an exposition of contemporary Hindu society in which caste is still the most powerful factor in determining the person’s dignity. The caste system is the result of the Hindu belief in reincarnation and karma. The four castes eventually developed into a social mass of several sub castes, with the untouchables at the bottom or outside the list. Birth decides one’s status and this cannot be altered
irrespective of any talent that a person may develop or wealth a person may accumulate. Similarly, the caste in which a person is born predetermines what vocation the person will pursue.

The chapter argues that the Hinduism with its notion of varna is a massive obstacle for an egalitarian religion according to Ambedkar. Varna he upheld was not quite a simple division of labour; in actual practice, this original principle of division of labor based on talent and inclination did not sustain itself long, so much so that even the most ignorant, fallen Brahmin continued to be regarded as someone next to god. Whereas a man from the lowest class, however high his qualifications, was condemned as a degraded person. Thus in practice, the social behaviour pattern tended towards caste behaviour, based on supremacy of one class over the other, which amounted to a denial of what had brought the Hindu social ideal into existence. The practice of the caste system and untouchability was the corner stone of the Hindu society. Brahmins considered themselves superior to other sections of the people. Hence, they enjoyed all privilege in society. Manu declared that the Brahmin is the Lord of all Varnas because of his superiority of birth and observation of rituals and sacraments. They themselves behaved as if they were the veritable gods on earth. The chapter analyses the afore cited viewpoint.
Given this context, the chapter continues to discuss the social standing of Brahmans, Shudras and Dalits in the Hindu World. It presents Ambedkar’s views on Shudras, Untouchability, Dalits in Hindu society. The chapter also maps Ambedkar’s oppositional standpoint of the redundant things in Hinduism. The chapter states to argue that Ambedkar was always in search of a religion, which could really shoulder the responsibility for the betterment of the depressed classes. Buddhism was the best option for him. It was based on ethics and the Buddha acted as a guide and not as a God whereas Krishna said that he was the God of gods; Christ said he was God’s son and Mohammed Paigamber said he was the last messenger of God. Except the Buddha, all founders of religion claimed for themselves the role of deliverer and claimed infallibility for themselves, while the Buddha was satisfied with the role of Guide. According to Ambedkar, the religion of the Buddha was morality.

The chapter concludes to put that despite of the decades of struggle and conflict, the scheduled castes in India continue to face widespread discrimination and inhumane treatment from the Hindu society even today. There were some early attempts made for the upliftment of the Untouchables. Nevertheless, those selfless works were in vain because of the rigid and traditional Hindu social system.
Ambedkar stood firmly in the midst of storms, and continuously thought of the Untouchables and fought for their equality and social freedom in the Indian society. For him, the Hindu society was nothing but a collection of castes, which is based on labourers than the labour. The issue handled in this chapter may appear simple but at the same time it is very important in the context to understand why Ambedkar decided to divorce Hinduism and accept Buddhism. Many researchers of philosophy may have attempted to write their dissertations on this topic but this chapter would deepen the understanding of “Ambedkar’s Critique of Hinduism”. Choosing this aspect of his philosophy precisely this chapter in the thesis aims at deepening the understanding of the caste system in India, the system which has divided people into higher castes, lower castes and Untouchables. Ambedkar’s own autobiography reflects how the erstwhile ‘untouchables’ were treated as separate entities without any right to integrate with mainstream society. “I knew that I was an untouchable and that untouchables were subjected to certain indignities and discriminations” (Ambedkar, “On the Way to Goregaon”, 53). The belief upheld in every village against the community of underprivileged castes was that they should be treated as separate. I hope my work on this topic through my knowledge and understanding of the caste system and the pains of inhuman treatment offered by the orthodox Hindu laws to the Untouchables experienced by
the father of the constitution will be helpful in unwinding the stark reality in India. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section explains the violent nature of caste system and Hinduism, the second section explains his rejection of Hinduism and the third section explains his views on religion, Buddhism and conversion.

I

Hinduism and Caste System

Ambedkar’s study of the philosophy of Hinduism was both a descriptive and a normative endeavor (“Philosophy” 4; Gokhale “Dr. Ambedkar as a Philosopher” 9-10). In Hindu society, caste is the most powerful marker in determining a person’s identity and social status. The caste system is the result of the Hindu belief in reincarnation and karma. The four castes eventually developed into a hierarchy of several sub castes, with the untouchables outside the hierarchical order. Caste system is rigid as ones caste is determined by ones birth. One is born into a caste, once born in a particular caste his/her status is determined and immutable. This cannot be altered, irrespective of wealth, talent and capabilities that a person may develop or accumulate. Caste also determines occupation. The four-major castes are:
a. *The Brahmins*, the priestly class. According to mythology, they are believed to have come from the head of God. They are eligible for learning, teaching and performing sacrifices. The non Brahmins cannot teach and perform sacrifices.

b. *The Ksatriyas*, the warrior class, come from the shoulder of God. They are eligible for learning. Their work is to protect the people by waging war against the enemy.

c. *The Vaisyas*, the trading class, emerged from the thighs of God. Their work is to trade and feed the above two classes.

d. *The Sudras*, the servants, came from the feet of God and their work is to do all menial jobs in order and to serve the other three classes. They are not entitled to learn anything.

(Massey 41).

Thus, each Varna had its own duties. This view is associated with the division of labour according to aptitude, liking and capacity of the individual. Its original aim was to promote organic unity among the Hindus. Each one could get, as Dr. B. L. Atreya says, a suitable vocation and facilities for carrying on the allotted work, each one serving the society in accordance with the best that each one could give and getting the delight consequent upon performing one’s duty in the best way. This is known, as the social ideal of *Chaturvarnya* and it was prevalent in the
Vedic period. (Jatava 7 - 8).

But in actual practice, this original principle of division of labor based on talent and inclination did not sustain itself long. The most evil and ignorant of upper caste Brahmins, came to be blindly regarded as someone next to God. While a person, from lower caste even if intelligent was condemned as a degraded person. Thus in practice, caste by birth (not abilities ) determined supremacy of one class over the other, and the ideal of Hinduism was negated. It emerged as the most violent and exploitative form through practice of untouchability. The Sudras thus suffered most atrocities because of the Varna system (Jatava 8 - 9).

The practice of the caste system and untouchability was the essence of the Hindu society. Brahmins considered themselves superior to other sections of the people. Hence, they enjoyed all privilege in society. Manu, the author of Manusmriti declared the Brahmins as the lord of the varna system because of the superiority of their birth that gave them legitimacy to perform rituals and sacraments (Michael 64). The Brahmins, according to Manu, are the lords of his creation because they are produced from the purest part of the Supreme Being, namely, the mouth. By birth, they become living embodiments of the eternal law. A Brahmin alone can achieve liberation and become one with the cosmic
whole as they alone are entitled to enter the fourth stage of life, that of asceticism. Blind beliefs like feeding the Brahmins as a way of gaining religious merit legitimized their superiority. All world was believed to be the property of Brahmins and the non Brahmins were suppose to be living on the Brahmin’s charity. According to Shatapatha Brahmana, the property of Brahmins were to be exempted from the royal claim. They were also to be exempted from corporal punishment. They were believed to be intermediaries between people and gods. The Brahmins were thus believed to be the sustainers and visible deities on earth (Massey 83-4). The others in the hierarchy were expected to submit themselves and obey the Brahmins. They were particularly oppressive in their treatment of the Sudras, whom they denied knowledge, economic prosperity and even social interaction.

The status given to the Sudras, thus was the opposite to the status given to the Brahmins. Their main duty was to serve others. The untouchables formed the lowest stratum of Hindu society. They were considered as a source of pollution. They were called, antya, the name was given to those who lived in the outskirts of the villages. They were considered outcastes; deserving no respectable place in society. They enjoyed no civil, political and economic rights. They were denied access to temples, public places, water sources, public wealth, education and
public services including police and military security. They were treated as non humans and the Sudras internalized this identity (Keer 2). They were subjected to worse forms of humiliation. Example, the food prepared by a Sudra was deemed unfit for the Brahmin’s consumption, a Sudra was not allowed to acquire wealth and conjugal intercourse with a Sudra was prohibited. Challenging any of these beliefs was considered the worse offense and one was threatened by a certain doom prescribed by the Gods. The sight and touch of the Sudra was considered to be enough to pollute household objects (Massey 84 - 5). The Manusmriti thus prescribed the worse forms of inequality and injustice.

The Manusmriti, according to Ambedkar, did not acknowledge equality because of its differential treatment of underprivileged castes and women (Philosophy of Hinduism, 22-37). It endorsed slavery, did not allow for a common rule of law and advocated assault against the so-called untouchables who stepped out of the limits imposed on them. It did not allow for a democratic entry point into the rituals it upheld and restricted the rules of initiation. The four ashramas were based on inequality as well. It was committed to a denial of the inherent worth of the human personality in its denial of equality. Besides it also endorsed illiteracy. The latter was because it did not allow non-Brahmins to partake of the Vedic scriptures and restricted education to a select few.
“Thus, Hinduism far from encouraging spread of knowledge is a gospel of darkness” (‘Philosophy of Hinduism’ 37).

Ambedkar argues that Hinduism violates liberty (Ibid 33). In order that an individual is free there is a need for social equality, economic security and knowledge available to all. But none of these conditions are possible in Hinduism. It violates the principle of freedom from oppression, in advocating an oppressive social order. Besides in violating equality – it also hinders human beings from underprivileged castes from pursuing matters that have meaning (34).

Hinduism, according to Ambedkar, did not allow for fraternity as it endorsed a hierarchical social order based on castes and subcastes- amounting to almost 3000 (Ibid, 38). It advocated a social psychology of hatred and “class war” as a “permanent phenomenon” (41). The Chandalas- ‘outcastes’ (48)- were treated with derision, as they were viewed as curse and seen as polluting in the mythologies of Ramayana and Mahabharata. Manusmriti followed this spirit of exclusion. Kautilya upheld Manu’s position by prescribing that the Chandalas lived beyond the burial grounds. Superstitions and violent beliefs like, a Brahmin, drinking water from the vessel of a Chandalas has to undergo the penance of living on a cow’s urine for a number of days, legitimized the degraded status of the untouchables. They were treated inhumanly, example, a
Chandala could enter a village only for sweeping, in the first half of the day, carrying a broom under his armpit and a small pot hanging around his neck. Illicit intercourse with females of lower castes by males of higher caste was not regarded in the nature of a serious offense. Adultery with a high caste woman was considered a crime, the punishment would be as severe as banishment or degradation to lower caste (Massey 85). Ambedkar also narrates several instances from the Ramayana and Mahabharata endorsing such beliefs. He argued that such dogmatic religious teachings were put into practice over centuries. “There is no sharing among the Hindus of joys and sorrows involved in vital facts of life. Everything is separate and exclusive. The Hindu is separate and exclusive throughout his life” (Ibid, 56). As a result, these religious practices enslaved the minds of millions of Dalits who would have otherwise been liberal and rational in their thinking. Without respite from violence they lost the urge to fight for their rights, self-respect and dignity. They were reduced to an unthinking agglomeration. The impact of the caste system continues to this day. The Dalits internalized their inferior status and believed that they were not worthy of entering temples or for that matter even the residential areas of high caste people. Even the gods and the goddesses worshipped by the Dalits were humiliated and discriminated by Brahmins. (Massey 85). In post independence India, the Brahmins became the rulers of the nation, which
according to all the Hindu religious scriptures is the prime duty of the Kshatriyas. Caste system and is atrocities continue to this day. To date, Dalits are not considered as complete human beings and treated worse than animals. Dalit massacres have always been a frequent phenomena. Violence against Dalit women is rampant as they take the form of public humiliation (being paraded naked or gang raped). Thus, among the many problems prevalent in India, the most ugly is the problem of caste discrimination; a system which has devalued the human dignity of Sudras the untouchables. As a result, they have remained socially degraded, economically impoverished and excluded from educational and cultural opportunities.

Ambedkar being a rationalist thinker, questioned the traditional social order of the Hindu society as violating the basic democratic principles of equality, liberty and fraternity in order to build a just and egalitarian society. Indeed, “He... interprets justice as liberty, equality and fraternity and proceeds to apply these as criteria to Hinduism” (Gokhale, “Dr. Ambedkar as a Philosopher, 9-10). Ambedkar’s ideals and praxis revolved around the welfare of humans to be achieved through social and political. He fought against social and political injustices throughout his life and could emerge successful to a considerable extent. His struggle was to consolidate Dalits and to make
them aware that they too are human beings and have the right to lead a happy life in society. The next section is an exposition of Ambedkra’s critique of Hinduism and caste order.

II

Hinduism and Caste System: Ambedkar’s Critique

We have considered so far the historical background that served to set the stage for the present social system in India. The inhuman social conditions of the labouring classes; the Sudras and the untouchables stirred Ambedkar’s sensitive mind and he devoted his life to discovering the causes, which led to the development of the exploitative social system of caste and untouchability in India. The practice of caste system jeopardized their free association with the rest of the society. They bore tyranny and insults without a complaint. Therefore, to restore their human dignity and give them a respectable place in society, Ambedkar struggled for about forty years and sought a religion that could deliver the depressed classes from the bondage of social evil. Ambedkar looked for a religion, which could really recognize, understand the sufferings and misery and give respect to their humanity. He wanted respect for Dalits, not as charity but as a right and wanted to create the spirit of independence and self-reliance among the Untouchables. He wanted to
see the birth of a new society-the birth of free human beings.

Hindu activism of thinkers like and Vivekananda, Gandhi and others (as discussed in the previous chapter) too worked towards the same, but they never wanted social reform through abolition of caste system. They tried to eradicate violence by reforming the caste system and Hinduism. Vivekananda also tried to assimilate all other religions (such as Buddhism) into Hinduism and advocating it as a world religion. Yet, Ambedkar believed that reforming the system would not help as caste hierarchy and untouchability was an intrinsic part of the caste system and caste is the foundation on which the Hindu religion stands. To quote Ambedkar, “… If you touch the caste system, the whole edifice of Hinduism will collapse, because Hinduism is nothing but caste” (Ambedkar, Annihilation of Caste 4).

Ambedkar was also the first Indian to challenge Marxist’s theory that a person’s status is determined by his property relation. Ambedkar in his work “Buddha or Marx” sees Marx as an obstacle to religious identity in the light of his atheism. For the Marxists, property was the only source of power. But this was contrary to the facts in India. Here the rulers and the rich landlord are governed by the dictates of the priestly class even though they are poorer than the rulers or landlords. Thus, according to Ambedkar, in India it is caste that decides the social
status and not the person’s property. It is true to a large extent that the upper castes of India belong to the upper class. Though class and caste are closely related, in India economic status does not deprive a person’s social status, which comes with his birth. According to Ambedkar, the Marxists have ignored this basic fact, not because they do not know the fact, but because the Marxist leadership comes from the upper caste, incorporating Ambedkar’s position was an inconvenient proposition for them (Ambedkar, Annihilation of Caste 5).

Further, Ambedkar also stated that India was not yet a nation, but a nation in the making. Contrary to the beliefs of the upper caste nationalist leaders and reformists, there is no nation as yet because oppressed classes in India are seeking for an identity of their own. Ambedkar had rightly realized the urgent need to fulfill the social aspiration of the oppressed in the interest of maintaining the unity of India, by respecting its diversity (Ambedkar, Annihilation of caste 5). According to Ambedkar, it was a pity that caste in modern times too has defenders. It was defended on the ground that the caste system was another name for the division of labour. Division of labour was considered a necessary feature of a civilized society, thus caste system was a legitimate system. Ambedkar argued that caste system was not merely a division of labour but it is also a division of labourers.
Civilized society may need division of labour, but Indian society was peculiar as division of labour was accompanied by an unnatural division of labourers into rigid compartments. Further, caste system was not merely division of labourers, it was a hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers were graded one above the other. In no other country was the division of labour accompanied by this gradation of labourers (Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* 36). The basis of such a gradation was the the *Purusa Sukta*, a section of the *Rigveda*, is unique in its prescription of the ideal of *Chaturvarnya*. This social organization, as the *Purusa Sukta* indicates, exists from the beginning and consists of the four Varnas. These Varnas are divinely ordained and have their own duties in a hierarchical order. The Sudras are included in the lowest level as those who belong to the servile class.

Concerning the origin of the Sudra, Dr. Ambedkar contests the view of the *Purusasukta* that there have always been four Varnas (in the Indo-Aryan society). According to him, there were, at first, only three Varnas, Brahmana, Kshatria and Vaisya. It is the *purusasukta*, which refers to and justifies the existence of the fourth Varna, i.e. the Sudra was a later addition. They were composed long after the *Rigvedas* was completed. The Vedas do not say anything about the origin of Sudras, only the *purusukta* dilates on them. That it is an ‘interpolation’ is the
opinion of many scholars (Jatava 33). According to Ambedkar the origin of Sudra may be traced back to the well-known struggle for supremacy, that took place in the ancient past, between the Brahmanas and the Kshatriyas. A struggle, which is reflected in the allegorical story of the many long wars between Vasistha and Visvamitra and their supporters. Both of them were priests, a Brahmana priest and a Kshatriya priest. There was hostility between them because each one claimed priority or superiority in matters relating to the institution of priesthood. In these conflicts and wars the key position was for a long time, occupied by Raja Sudas, the strong supporter of Visvamitra. At the end, however, victory went to Vasistha and his Brahmaana supporters. They celebrated their triumph by condemning the progeny of the Sudras to menial tasks, making them occupy the lowest rung of the social ladder. They were so degraded that they became the lowest class—Sudras; degraded people in the Indo-Aryan society.

Ambedkar’s theory of the origin of the Sudras may be summarized as follows: The Sudras were one of the Aryan communities of the solar race and ranked as the Kshatriya Varna in the Indo-Aryan society. There was a time, when the Aryan society recognized only three Varnas, namely, the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas. The Sudras were not a separate Varna, but a part of the Kshatriya Varna.
There was a continuous feud between the Sudra kings and the Brahmins, in which the latter were subjected to many tyrannies and indignities. As a result of the hatred towards the Sudras, generated by their tyrannies and oppressions, the Brahmins refused to perform the Upanayana (ceremonies) of the Sudras. Owing to this denial, the Sudras became socially degraded, fell below the rank of the Vaishyas and thus came to form the fourth Varna (Jatava 33-8).

Untouchability, as a practice was justified on various erroneous grounds. The main cause was the obsession of the Brahmins to maintain purity and to avoid pollution. Endogamy was the essence of the caste system. Brahmins introduced an elaborate system to preserve their purity. They married among themselves and if they had sexual relations with women of lower castes like the Kshatriyas, Vaishya or Sudras, the progeny was not entitled to the privileges allowed to those who were born of Brahmin women’s womb. In order to maintain purity, all relations with lower castes were prescribed. Those who opposed the Brahmin religion or rebelled against the caste system were branded as untouchable and were declared as outcastes (Massey 58-9).

According to Ambedkar, in primitive society there were nomadic communities. The tribal communities were based on blood relationship. In modern societies had settled communities and local communities
based on territorial affiliation. The primitive society was nomadic, not because of any migratory instinct, but it was the result of the fact that the earliest form of wealth held by primitive society was castles. Cattle had the migratory character. This society became a settled community when a new kind of wealth was discovered; land. The progress of agriculture became the main source round which the whole society became settled. Soon this led to wars and a new problem of accommodating the defeated tribes arose. The defeated tribes consisted of a floating population of groups of broken tribesmen roaming in different directions. They had to live as stray individuals, shelter and protection posed a problem for them. The settled communities and broken men struck a bargain whereby the broken men agreed to do the work of watch and ward for the settled tribes and the settled tribes agreed to give them food and shelter. As the broken men were aliens, they began to live outside the village. This explained why it was natural to suppose that the untouchables from the very beginning lived outside and untouchability had nothing to do with their living outside the village (Kuber 39-40).

Thus according to Ambedkar, the Vedas were lies and the Hindu society with its Varna system was a myth. Ambedkar explained that infact the name Hindu itself was a foreign name (Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 40). It was given by the Mohammedans to the
natives for the purpose of distinguishing themselves. It does not occur in any Sanskrit work prior to the advent of the Muslims. They did not feel the necessity of a common name because they had no conception of their having constituted a community. Hindu society as such does not exist. It is only a collection of castes (40).

The caste system could not have been grown as a means of preventing the admixture of the races or as a means of maintaining purity of blood. As a matter of fact caste system came into being long after different races of India had commingled in blood and culture. Ambedkar believed that holding caste distinctions as distinctions of race was a gross perversion of facts. There was no racial affinity between the Brahmins of the Punjab or Madras, or between the untouchable of Bengal and Madras, between the Brahmin of Punjab and Chamar of Punjab. The Brahmin of Punjab is racially the same as the Chamar of Punjab and the Brahmin of Madras is the same race as the Dalit of Madras. Caste system did not demarcate racial division. Caste system was thus a social division of people of the same race (Ambedkar, Annihilation of Caste 38).

Caste system was negative because it prohibited people belonging to different castes from inter-marrying. It was not a positive method of selecting which among a given caste should marry. According to
Ambedkar, it was a misunderstanding to assume that caste and sub-castes were eugenic in origin. If caste meant race then differences of sub-castes could not mean differences of race because sub-castes would then become a subdivision of one and the same race. Consequently the bar against intermarrying and inter-dining between sub-castes cannot be for the purpose of maintaining purity of race or blood. If sub-castes cannot be eugenic in origin there cannot be any substance in the contention that caste is eugenic in origin. Thus, the bar against intermarriage was baseless. The purpose of the prohibiting inter caste marriages and all forms of interaction was baseless. Inter-dining could not infect blood and therefore cannot be the cause either of the improvement or of deterioration of race. This shows that caste has no scientific origin and that those who are attempting to give it a eugenic basis are trying to support by science that which is grossly unscientific.

Thus, according to Ambedkar, caste system was a social system which embodied the arrogance and selfishness of a perverse section of the Hindus who were superior in social status who had authority to force it on their inferiors.

Similarly Ambedkar also deflates the occupational theory of the origin of caste system. Division of labour is not spontaneous; it is not based on natural aptitudes. Social and individual efficiency requires one
to develop the capacity of an individual to the point of competency to choose and to make his own career. This principle was violated in the caste system as it involved an attempt to appoint tasks to individuals in advance, selected not on the basis of trained original capacities, but on that of the social status of the parents. From the point of view of stratification of occupations caste system was dangerous as it calls for rigidity in the sector of industry is always changing rapidly and abruptly. With such changes, an individual must be free to change his occupation. Without freedom to adjust to changing circumstances it would be impossible to have access to a gainful livelihood. The caste system did not allow Hindus to take to occupations voluntarily, occupation was determined by heredity. By not permitting readjustment of occupations, caste became a direct cause of much of the ignorance, poverty and unemployment (Ambedkar, Annihilation of Caste 37) The division of labour brought about by the caste system was not a division based on choice. Individual sentiment, individual preference had no place in it. It is based on the dogma of predestination. As an economic organization, caste was therefore a harmful institution, as well as inhuman as it involve the subordination of man’s natural powers (37). The next section explains Amedkar’s rejection of the Hindu caste order and his views on religion and conversion. Given the exploitative and oppressive nature of caste Ambedkar believed that any effort to improve the lot of the lower
caste should be directed towards uprooting the very caste system itself. The next section is an elaboration of the same.

III

Beyond Casteist Hinduism

Ambedkar was of the view that as long there would be a caste system, there would exclusions and discrimination. He fought against the tyranny of caste oppression by mobilizing the Dalits under the banner of “educate, agitate and unite.” His aim was to inculcated in their minds the value of self-respect, dignity, and an urge to fight for their rights (Massey 88). The notion of dharma is central to Hinduism. It means duty, right virtue, morality, law, truth and righteousness, a path that leads to salvation or liberation (Brown 61). Its fundamental scriptures, the Manusmriti and the Vedas, advocate observance of caste system as a dharma. It is believed to be a divine institution that sanctions inequality, subjugation, oppression and violence. Thus, Ambedkar condemned Hinduism in his Annihilation of Caste as “...a religion of rules, compendium of rituals, regulations which are based on the caste ideology of hierarchy and untouchability” (Ambedkar 120). He enumerated the evils of Hindu religion, firstly, it tends to deprive all castes other than Brahmins of a spiritual and moral life, freedom,
spontaneity and reduce social life to a more or less anxious and servile conformity to externally imposed rules. Secondly, there is no loyalty to reason and rational visions, there is only conformity to commands. Thirdly, the laws were iniquitous in that they were not the same for one class as for another. The unequal laws were to be followed across generations. Fourthly, the laws were not made by certain persons called prophets or law-givers. Fifthly, the code had been invested with the character of finality and fixity.

The four-fold caste system according to Ambedkar was at the root of Hinduism. It was a unique case of ideals being put into practice (Philosophy of Hinduism, 58). It has to be rejected on the grounds of experience. It has failed to integrate people from the social point of view. It has failed to motivate productivity from the producer’s point of view. It has failed to effect a system of distribution. Caste divided labourers, dissociated work from interest, disconnected intelligence from manual labour, devitalized the labourer and prevented mobilization (Ambedkar, ‘Philosophy of Hinduism’, 58-62)

Thus, he concluded that the Hindu religion must be destroyed and that there was nothing wrong in working for the destruction of such a religion. He emphasized that people must be enabled to realize that what they are told was not religion but that it was really law and its abolition
and amendment was urgent (Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* 73 – 4). Moreover, he did not restrict his critique to the *Manusmirit* but extended it to the *Gita* and the Vedas since Hindu texts were authored by Brahmins (“Philosophy of Hinduism, 70). Since the religion did not teach virtues like liberty, equality and fraternity and could not bring about the well being of the people, the religion deserved to be abolished. For Ambedkar a true religion is meant for the upliftment of the individual irrespective of caste, creed, sex, etc. But the Hindu religions instead of giving humanitarian service, treated people, especially the backward classes, unjustly. It did not safeguard their interests. Hence this religion did not appeal to Ambedkar’s conscience. He argued that it failed on grounds of utility and justice (“Philosophy of Hinduism”, 62). Defining the term religion, as that which holds the people together, he said, “The religion which does not recognize the individuality of man is not acceptable to me” (as quoted in Kadam 45).

Inspite of a consistent struggle to challenge the tenets of Hinduism, Ambedkar was ultimately convinced that the only way out was to reject the religion altogether. He aspired for a religion, that could serve as a means for the upliftment of the Untouchables. On 13 October 1935, a provincial conference of the depressed classes was held at Yeola in Nasik district. In his presidential address he announced his decision to
leave Hinduism and said, “I was born in Hinduism but I will not die as a Hindu” (Kuber 23). Explaining the evils of Hinduism, he emphasized that the oppressed did not need merely sympathy, equality and liberty. True emancipation was not possible unless Hinduism was rejected. According to Ambedkar, “If you have to get rid of this same shameful condition, if you have to cleanse this filth and make use of this precious life, there is only one way and that is to throw off the shackles of Hindu religion and the Hindu society in which you are bound (Ambedkar 17).

According to Ambedkar, true religion is that which leads to social emancipation. Unlike the Marxists who rejected religion, Ambedkar believed that religion was a part of once inheritance. Critiquing materialism, he believed that religion was the driving force of human activities. Ambedkar regarded slavery as the antithesis of a religious society. To him religion was for the service of people and not the other way round, thus his understanding of religion was very unique. A true religion must cause the upliftment of the individual. It should teach the virtues of fellow-feeling, equality and liberty (Keer 273-4). Religion must be judged by social standards, based on social ethics. He linked religion with the social well-being of the people. To him religion, social status and property were all sources of power and authority. He wanted to have a rational religion that would truly be of universal appeal of
justice, emancipation and truth. Ambedkar believed that four characteristics were intrinsic to the nature of religion:

1) Religion in the sense of morality must remain the governing principle in every society.

2) Religion must be in accord with reason and science.

3) Its moral code must recognize the fundamental tenets of liberty, equality and fraternity as principles of social life.

4) It should not sanctify or ennable poverty (Kuber 76).

Tracing the genesis of religion, Ambedkar stated that, religion had undergone four stages: in its original form religion was the matter of personal salvation of individual’s soul; in its second stage it meant the maintenance of human brotherhood based on moral rules governing the conduct of human beings towards each other; in its third stage, people worshipped those personalities who satisfied the wants of their lives; and in its last stage it worshipped a person who performed miracles (Keer 449). He defined religion as something that promised people false prosperity and elevation in this as well as in next world (Kuber 78).

Critiquing this version of religion, Ambedkar believed that the center of religion should not be the relation between human beings and god, but between human beings. He believed that belief in God would
only lead to efficacy of worship and prayer, which would sanction the superiority of the priests who encouraged superstitions and destroyed the rational and critical spirit of people (Kuber 76). He thought religion created priesthood and gave priests complete control over people, from birth to death. By denying the existence of soul and God, he also ruled out the possibility of past karmas as the regulator of human existence. Thus, he ruled out all notions of salvation. He encouraged the untouchables to understand that their emancipation was in education and acquiring political powers; not in making pilgrimages and observances of fasts (Kuber 77-8). Finally, he embraced Buddhism. According to Ambedkar the Buddhist social approach was more comprehensive and humanistic than any religion or the Marxist view of people in society. Buddha’s teaching, he thought, was more suited to the needs of practical social life. Buddha tried to blend the socio-economic and political ideas on the basis of moral foundation. By stressing the unity of individuals on a social and political level he endeavoured to transform human life into an ideal one based on equality and liberty, love and sympathy. Moral and religious life, as he conceived it, was based on the social organization and the conduct of man in society. Among the four preceptors: Shri Krishna, Buddha, Christ and Mohammed. Buddha appealed to him most as he always preached that his disciples should not obey his commands but should follow the dictates of their conscience.
There was no god in Buddhism, but the place of God was taken by morality (Kuber 81). The basis of Buddhism was love, compassion, sympathy and thus was the only religion that could give the oppressed equality, liberty, and fraternity. Its ideals were based on social democracy as well as secularism (Kuber 80).

Religion, as Ambedkar conceived, was a rational, moral and spiritual order. It was secular and not extra mundane. He regarded the Buddhist doctrine of dhamma as true religion. Dhamma is a social principle, there is no place for prayers, pilgrimages, rituals, ceremonies or sacrifices. Morality is the true essence of Dhamma (Keer 323). He describes Dhamma as righteousness; right relations between human beings in all spheres of life. Dhamma rejected belief in God, belief in soul, worship of God, curing of the erring soul, propitiating god by prayers, ceremonies and sacrifices. Instead it emphasized on reconstructing the world order by establishing right relations among human beings (Keer 376). It was based on ethics and the Buddha acted as a guide; not as a God, thus, contrary to claims of most religions. Example, Hindusim and Bhagwat Gita proclaimed Krishna as the God of Gods, Christ was believed to be God’s son and Mohammed Paigamber the last messenger of God. Except the Buddha, all founders of religion claimed for themselves the role of mokshadata (deliverer) and claimed
infallibility for themselves, while the Buddha was satisfied with the role of margadatta or guide. According to him, the religion of the Buddha was morality, thus the social gospel of Buddhism was equality (Kuber 90 – 1) According to Ambedkar, Buddhism was a true religion because it led to a life guided by the three principles: knowledge, right path and compassion. He contended that the Buddha sought to raise the social status of the servile classes and he believed in the necessity and urgency of the social and religious reforms, which the poor, the fallen and the weak needed. Buddhism was not merely a protest but a challenge to the whole Hindu society’s unfair behaviour-patterns. (Kuber 94). The Buddhist way of life aimed at the moral regeneration and social emancipation of human beings; each member of society had to strive for his own moral progress as well as that of other individuals. The Buddhist way of life was further divided into two parts: the Buddhist way for the laity and the Buddhist way for the Bhikkus; these included the whole range of moral behaviour patterns in Buddhist society, Ambedkar interpreted the bhikkus as social reformers.

Thus, Ambedkar, defended conversion. It was a change from one religion to another with the purpose of gaining spiritual, psychological, social and economical satisfaction that could give people a life of dignity and respect, to fulfil their talents and make their lives meaningful. In
Buddhism there was space to profess ones faith and recognize one’s desires and aspirations. According to Ambedkar, the merits of Buddhism were, firstly, Buddhism demanded living experience and a life divine attainable in this life (not after death). Secondly, it was a realist ideology that upheld liberty, equality, truth and justice, humanity, love and peace as the ultimate humanitarian ideals. Thirdly, it was dynamic, scientific and all-embracing. Its explanation of life and its meaning and purpose of birth and death were intelligible and logical. Latly, most importantly, human beings were the center of his study and examination (Kuber 90).

Thus Ambedkar, encouraged the oppressed castes to convert to Buddhism. Jyotirao Phule was perhaps the first to have used the term Dalit to describe the outcastes and the untouchables as the oppressed and the broken victims of our caste-ridden society (Michael, “Untouchable”). Under the leadership of Ambedkar, this term gained greater importance and popularity. The term denoted both the state of deprivation of the oppressed as well as their rejection of Hinduism. Thus the term is not a mere name or a title; it is an expression of hope. The term has gained a new connotation with a more positive meaning. The term Dalit did not mean caste or low-caste or poor; it referred to the deplorable state or condition to which a large group of people had been reduced by social convention to the most exploitative and vulnerable state (Massey 6). It
literally meant broken- so it indicated the injured condition of the downtrodden castes, who were literally crushed by upper caste Hindus. The name Dalit was an attempt at self-representation and dignity. Before the coinage of the term dalit, the oppressed were called by derogatory names in different parts of the country (given by upper caste people as expressions of contempt). These names include: Dasa, Dasyu, Raksasa, Asura, Avarna, Nisada, Panchma, Chandala, Harijan, and untouchables. Besides these names there are a number of other titles, which have been given to them at the level of the regional language. For example, Chura in Punjabi (North-west India), Bangi or Lal-Beghi in Hindi (North India), Mahar in Marathi (Central India), Mala and Madiga in Telugu, Paraiya in Tamil and Pulayan in Malayalam (South India). These names carried within them the violent nature of separation of identities, namely, “we– the Pure” and “you-the Impure”. In response to these insulting labels, the untouchables have chosen to give themselves the name Dalit which referred to the hardship of their condition of life. This name was meant to be a reminder of the age-old oppression that had reduced some people abject poverty and humiliation (Massey 7).

The relevance of this activism is still most relevant and urgent. Despite decades of struggle and conflict, the scheduled castes in India
continue to face widespread discrimination and inhumane treatment from the Hindu society even today. The Hindu society continues to be a collection of castes, which is based on labourers than the labour. Even tough he sought refuge in Buddhism, caste exploitation continues to exist to date. The incident in the recent past in which the Dalits were forced to eat human excreta and drink urine as a punishment for engaging in human rights activities shows their plight. Such inhuman treatment is meted out to the Dalits not only by the caste Hindus but also by the state. Principles of *Varnashrama Dharma* continue to dominate the social life of people and the practice of untouchability is still not eradicated in social and religious practices (Massey 87). The next chapter analyses analysers Dr Ambedkar’s major work *Buddha and his Dhamma* from philosophical perspective and attempts to make a strong case for Ambedkar’s project of rational religion and conversion to Buddhism.