AMBEDKAR MOVEMENT:
EVOLUTION OF AN IDEOLOGY

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Chapter 5
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AMBEDKAR MOVEMENT: 
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In this section an attempt is made to trace the unfolding of the movement 
led by Dr. Ambedkar for the emancipation of the Dalits from their 
dehumanised position. Ambedkar was the first social reformer who rose from 
the community of untouchables and led a movement at national level for the 
liberation of the Dalits. Though there were several leaders who worked for 
the cause of the down trodden, for instance Mahatma Phule, Periyar, Narayana 
Guru, Vithal Rao Shinde, Aruna Desai, they belonged to the category of 
Hindus ‘superior’ to the untouchables. Though their dedication to the cause 
of the untouchables is unquestionable the movements led by them did not 
have an exclusive focus on eradication of untouchability and the emancipation 
of the untouchables.

Spokesman of the Voiceless

Many people consider the beginning of Ambedkar movement as his 
appearance in the public meeting held at the Damodar Hall in Bombay on 9 
March 1924. But this is far from reality. One can see that the seeds of the 
movement had been laid down in his school day itself when he had undergone 
the trauma of casteism and untouchability. Certainly the young Ambedkar 
might have revolted against the casteism within the boundaries of his 
childhood. However, the overt crystallisation of the movement in the form of 
social action was in the year 1920 when he established the Marathi fortnightly 
the ‘Mooknayak’. Ambedkar started ‘Mooknayak’ at a juncture when the 
printmedia were in the hands of the upper caste Hindus, and it was extremely
difficult, if not impossible, for any leader from the down trodden class to take the message of reformation to the people through a publication. When he sent a paid advertisement announcing the publication of ‘Mookanayak’ to ‘Keshari’, it refused to publish, even though Lokmanya Tilak was still alive.

The ‘Mookanayak’ was published with the financial support from Maharaja Chatrapati Shahu of Kolhapur and was aimed at making the untouchables aware of the dehumanised condition in which they were living. The editorials of the magazine, though at the very beginning of his public career, are indicative of the directions in which his mind was working. In the very first editorial of ‘Mokanayak’ he dealt with the hierarchical structure of the Hindu society which included the three major castes – the Brahmins, the non-Brahmins and the untouchables. The Brahmins at the top of the social hierarchy had access to religious as well as secular education and because of this they were represented in Government jobs in large numbers, quite out of proportion to their number in the population. The non-Brahmin caste Hindus had remained backward, because they did not give any importance to education, though they had social and religious sanction for the same. The untouchables on the other hand were not only denied access to education but also were forced to stick to their lowly occupation. They were totally debarred from any opportunity for self development.¹

In such a condition of social apathy Ambedkar made clear his position on the nationalist movement, that it was not enough for India to become independent, but the country must extend equal rights – social, religious and political – to all its inhabitants, irrespective of caste and creed and would
open the channels of development to all sections of society. The Indian National Congress had replaced its objectives of achieving ‘Good Government’ with the attainment of ‘Self Government’. On this Ambedkar wrote:

While one cannot object to the principle involved, we would not be able to support. Whose self government is this going to be and what will be its practical goals – for practice is more important than principle.

He wanted that the untouchables should also have a share in such self-government; without it the ‘self government’ would mean a government over the already depressed. He urged further that the untouchables should receive not just a proportionate but a weighted representation in the legislatures. He was totally opposed to the suggestion that the representatives of the untouchables be chosen by nomination. Thus, through the ‘Mooknayak’ Ambedkar not only raised the strident voice of the untouchables for their share in the proposed measures of self government but also accused the Congress of the deliberate neglect of the interest of the untouchables.

Apart from the criticism of the Hindu social order and the Congress, Ambedkar used the editorial column of the Mooknayak to expose the caste-Hindu social reformers like Tilak, V.R. Shinde etc. who had kept the Government ignorant of the true condition of the untouchables and had opposed their efforts to obtain a share in political power through independently chosen representatives. He remarked that the exposing of the game that the caste Hindu leadership was trying to play was a signal for a new awakening among the untouchables. His main objective was to establish a separate identity of the untouchable in the Indian society.
Conference of the Untouchables

In March 1920 Ambedkar presided over a conference of the untouchables of Kolhapur state. At this conference Maharaja Chatrapati Shahu hailed him as the leader that the untouchables had chosen for themselves. The Maharaja told the gathering:

I am confident Dr. Ambedkar will not rest till he achieve your upliftment. And he will not rest there: a time will come when he will lead the entire nation. I feel certain about it.

In the month of May the First All India Conference of Untouchables was organised at Nagpur under the presidentship of Chatrapati Shahu. Speaking in this conference Ambedkar severely criticised Shinde and his ‘Depressed Class Mission’, for submitting to the South Borough Committee a proposal to nominate the representative of the depressed classes in the proposed legislature of Bombay. Under the initiation of Dr. Ambedkar the conference passed a resolution requesting the Government to reject Shinde’s suggestion and to let the untouchables select their own representatives.

The demand for selection of the representatives of the untouchables by themselves formed the most significant political demand of the Dalits at that time and of the Ambedkar movement, on which he was not ready for any compromise. This demarcated Ambedkar movement from all other attempts led by the caste Hindu leaders for the cause of the untouchables. Ambedkar held the ideological position that the interests of the untouchables are not the same as those of the caste Hindus and that could not be submitted.
Bahishkrit Hitakarani Sabha

Between September 1920 and April 1923 Ambedkar pursued his higher studies in the UK and Germany. Back in India he started practice of Law in the Bombay High Court, but continued his social action with new vigour and energy. Based on the foundation laid down through ‘Mooknayak’ and in the conferences of untouchables held in 1920 Ambedkar moved for establishing a broad organisation for the cause of the depressed classes. He convened a meeting of the persons sympathetic to the cause of untouchables on 9 March 1924 to discuss the need to founded a society which could place the social and political problems of the untouchables before the Government. Accordingly the ‘Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha’, the society to serve the interests of the outcasts was founded on 20th July 1924.

The members and the office bearers of the Sabha included not only untouchables but Parsis and upper caste Hindus as well. This particular composition of the Sabha indicates that Ambedkar wanted to form a broad platform within the fabric of the Hindu social order for working effectively for the cause of the untouchables. He had realised that the Congress and other organisations led by the caste Hindus cannot work for the cause of the untouchables because of their class interests. He had already expressed dissatisfaction with Shinde’s style of leadership and insensitivity of the Congress to the problems of the untouchables. The adoption of a resolution on abolition of untouchability by the Congress in 1917 and passing the same in the Bombay conference on untouchability in 1918 were only a part of the political ploy to ensure that the untouchables remained with the congress.
Notwithstanding the nature of the membership Ambedkar was very much clear about the goal to be achieved by ‘Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha’. The aim of the sabha as articulated by him was to Educate, Agitate and Organise the depressed classes for their upliftment.

The Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha had done much for the educational awakening of the untouchables. The Sabha opened up a hostel for the untouchable children, by which action he opened a channel for them to stay and study without being subjected to the humiliating practice of untouchability which usually had been the main cause for the Dalit students terminating their studies prematurely. Despite these the Sabha could not achieve what exactly Ambedkar dreamed of. Moreover, the ‘Mooknayak’, the periodical which he started in 1920 had stopped its publication. This created a period of vacuum, at least for the time being, in the realm of social movement. This situation convinced Ambedkar of the need to start a new organisation and a new publication. Meanwhile, at his individual level he gave evidence before the Hiltong Young Commision on Indian currency, in 1926 and continued his practice in law from his office in Parel. In 1927 he was nominated by the Governor to the Bombay Legislature. Earlier he had made strong plea to the British Government for resuming the recruitment of Mahars to the army. He had also criticised the Government for the ingratitude towards Mahars in denying them recruitment to the army, although the same Mahars had helped the British in their battles in Western India.

Mahad Conference

The most significant event of these years was the Mahad Conference
held in March 1927. This conference, organised with a view to assert the rights of the untouchables to draw drinking water from an open public tank (The Chowdar Tank), was the first act of public protest led by Ambedkar. The Bombay Legislative Council had passed a resolution in August 1926 directing the municipalities and the district boards to implement an earlier legislation throwing all public places open to all castes including the untouchables. Following the direction, Mahad Municipal Council had declared the Chowdar Tank, a natural rain water tank, open to all communities. Despite this legislation the local untouchables were hesitant to take water from the tank for fear of upper caste reprisal. Ambedkar found this as the right opportunity to lead a public action for the cause of the untouchables and accordingly the conference was convened.

Ambedkar and his colleagues organised 5000 untouchables from different parts of the Bombay Presidency to attend this conference. The conference was attended also by some sympathisers from the upper castes including Brahmins. Ambedkar’s address at this conference was an indication of the unfolding of his ideology and strategy. He exhorted the audience to organise mass protest of the untouchables intended to establish their rights – social and political. He went on to urge upon his followers the importance of education, particularly higher education and the need for them to find independent means of livelihood. His advice was to give up the shameful life of beggarly dependence on the upper castes, as servants of the village and to take up independent cultivation instead.

In the opening sessions of the conference the speakers including caste-Hindu leaders implored that the untouchables should have equal rights with
the upper caste Hindus and that the decision of the Mahad municipality declaring the tank open to all should be put into practice. Although a resolution in the conference was adopted on this subject, there was no follow-up for an immediate action to operationally uphold the right of the untouchables to take water from the tank. But the subject committee decided to perform a symbolic act of assertion of the right and the decision was put to the open session on the next day. The caste-Hindu leaders who spoke eloquently on the need to abolish untouchability did not agree to such a direct action at that moment and withdrew from the session. Subsequently the volunteers in groups of four marched in a file to the tank and started drawing water. Ambedkar also walked down the steps of the tank and drank a handful of water from it.

This action provoked the caste Hindus of Mahad. Meanwhile a rumour had spread around that having taken water from the tank the untouchables were next intending to enter the near by Veereshwar Temple. Resultantly large crowds of caste-Hindu youths gathered with stones and sticks, rushed to the venue of the conference, fell upon the untouchables and started beating them.

Hearing the news of the havoc caused by the caste Hindus on the volunteers, Ambedkar went around the conference pandal and was moved by the condition of those who had been injured in the assault. He advised his followers to keep restrain and not to attempt to retaliate, and made arrangement for the wounded to get medical attention. He spent another couple of days in Mahad to collect information on the violent attack and the condition of the victims with the help of his colleagues. On he basis of the information thus
gathered, he gave a detailed report of the incident to the District Superintendent of Police and explained to him the need for special security and protection of the untouchables. He also tried to call a private meeting of the non Brahmin leaders of Mahad to seek their help in preventing recurrence of such incidents.

The entire event had emanated long term consequences in the relationship between the caste Hindus and the untouchables of the area. The orthodox Hindus in Mahad and Konkan became apprehensive of the challenge posed by the untouchables. The caste - Hindus purified the water tank from which Ambedkar and his followers drank water, as part of their symbolic protest. The untouchables on the other hand became more defiant.

The critical importance of this event in Ambedkar movement is that it opened up ways for educating and mobilising the untouchables for more concrete and vigorous actions of organised protests. The Mahad conference established the unquestionable leadership of Ambedkar in the space of Dalit movement.

**Bahishkrit Bharat**

The impact of the Mahad conference and the related incidents made Ambedkar to resolve not to settle the things down. This determination, however, could not be executed without a medium to communicate his message. The ‘Mooknayak’ had already stopped its publication. In its place, he started the fortnightly Marati paper. ‘Bahiskrit Bharat’ on 3rd April 1927. But this organ also could not survive for long. The last issue of the paper was published on 15th November 1929.

Within the short period of publication of ‘Bahishkrit Bharat’, Ambedkar
he himself being its editor, could clarify his positions on many current issues and also could awaken his followers for protest movements and direct actions for achieving social equality. His writing, in ‘Bahishkrit Bharat’ are considered as the most single source of Ambedkar’s early ideas on the challenge posed by the practice of untouchability and on what the untouchables could themselves do to counter it.

Ambedkar used ‘Bahishkrit Bharat’ not only as a medium to educate his followers but also to expose the hypocrisy of the Dalit leaders. In the very first issue of the paper he wrote:

It has been the tradition of the past forty years for leaders in Maharashtra to do nothing themselves to spread the right values among the people and then to a legitimate movement for justice on the plea of ignorance of the mass people.

His writings in the periodical reveal that till then Ambedkar pursued a social reformist approach in movements for the upliftment of the untouchables. He had situated the movement and himself within the problematics of the Hindu social order. He kept the optimism that the Hindu society can be reformed from within; but at the same time he had sensed the difficulty in restructuring it on the basis of the principle of equality. In the same issue of ‘Bahishkrit Bharat’ Ambedkar asserted:

So long as we consider ourselves to be Hindus and so long as you consider us as Hindus we have a right to enter a temple and worship the idol. We do not want
separate temples..... Temples are intended to facilitate community worship and community interaction or community unity..... We want equal rights in society. We will achieve them as far as possible while remaining within the Hindu fold or, if necessary, by kicking away this worthless Hindu identity. And if it becomes necessary to give up Hinduism it would no longer be necessary for us to bother about temples.  

Thus, at this juncture a gradual ideological shift was happening in Ambedkar. He had realised that reforming the social order to establish social, political and economic equality by persuading the caste - Hindus to shed their attitudes towards the untouchables is impossible, if not futile. This might have ignited his thought to consider the possibility of abandoning Hinduism by the untouchables for achieving social equality. Such a thought was quite natural in the sense that cast system had made the Hindu social structure so rigid that it required an overhaul of the system for introducing equalitarian principles in it.

The graded inequality in the society, as termed by Ambedkar, gives social, politic and economic advantages to the upper castes and keeps the untouchables always at the lowest rung of the social ladder. Moreover a basic social reconstruction was not a priority in the agendas of the major political movements of the time. The British rule on the other hand had only contributed to strengthen the existing social order without harming their colonial interest. Thus the threat to abandon Hinduism by the untouchable was gradually being
given priority in the strategy of the Ambedkar movement. However, a religious conversion was not a concern of the movement at that point of time; rather Ambedkar preferred to solve the problem of untouchability within the fold of Hinduism if possible.

Thus, in the editorial of the second issue of (22 April 1927) of Bahishkrit Bharat Ambedkar remarked that what had happened in Mahad was not just a common riot but a religious war. It was a declaration by the untouchables that, being a part of the Hindu society and followers of Hinduism, they were equal in status and had the same rights as others. But the answer given by the high caste was negative. Ambedkar warned the caste Hindus that untouchables would look upon the episode over drawing of water not as a riot, but as the first battle in the religious war for establishing equality. He went on to inspire his followers that the ultimate victory would be theirs.

In the issue of 6 May 1927 Ambedkar urged the British government in India that the untouchables had the legal right of equal access to public places and it was the duty of the Government to uphold it. He reminded the government that constraints imposed by customs on the free movement of members of any caste or community along the public road would be contrary to the principles of British administration. On what had happened in Mahad, he pointed out that the administration had failed to give adequate protection to the untouchable delegates attending the conference.

Ambedkar found that the caste Hindus were against the removal of untouchability. He no more believed in the eradication of this social scourge and betterment of the condition of the untouchables by an attitudinal change
on the part of the caste-Hindus. He wrote in the 20 May 1927 issue of ‘Bahishkrit Bharat’:

In brief, we can only conclude that the practice of untouchbility is a whim of the caste-Hindus.’ You are untouchables because we regard you as such’. There seems no reason other than this whim that explains the practice of untouchbility. The higher castes call this ‘whim’ thier ‘custom’ and treat the custom as law to force untouchbility on the outcastes.

A curious fact in the context of all the ‘efforts’ at untouchbility removal is that no one has asked what the untouchables think of this so called ‘custom’ or ‘tradition’. On the other hand, we are flatly told that there is need for further reform in the attitudes of the caste Hindus and until then we must remain untouchables 10.

He did not want the untouchables to wait and wait for a change of minds of the upper-castes to get rid of the bane of untouchability. Rather he held that if untouchables had resisted it organisedly the caste-Hindus would not have been forced untouchability on them. Therefore, he exhorted them to organise mass social actions rather than following in the path of persuasion. The past three decades had revealed that however reasonable and justifiable were the demands of the untouchables, they could not get even an iota of consideration from the Hindus. Hence, the only means to awaken the people, the caste-Hindus as well as the untouchables themselves, was social resistance through public protests.
Ambedkar gradually found that there is no meaning in waging his struggle within the social space of Hinduism. He thought that a boycott of the religion would give a fatal blow to the cast- Hindus and would speed up the process of social readjustment. In the subsequent issues of the ‘Bahishkrit Bharat’ Ambedkar’s voice became more strident; he literally declared the boycott. Clarifying the position, he wrote:

We do not value Hinduism, we value human dignity. If we were to find this dignity while remaining Hindus we would not give the advice of boycotting the Hindus.... Further, we are fully aware that if Hindu society ever recognise our humanity it will not be because of the self-evident nature of our humanity; but because of the force of circumstances

Thus, a strategic change in the Ambedkar movement can be seen at this juncture. Moving ahead from convening conferences and exhorting the untouchables about their dehumanised position in the society to a strategy of mass protest and resistance gave the movement a radical face. Ambedkar used the word ‘Pratikar’ to emphasise the potential of the protest and resistance which included not only an open fight against the caste-Hindu highhandedness but also the assertion of the natural rights by the untouchables. The other potential strategy was the ‘boycott’ of caste-Hindus by withholding services from them. The conversion from Hinduism was conceived, at this stage, only as a threat to the Hindu sentiment, but at any rate no spiritual implication was involved in the use of the strategy of boycott. Alongside,
Ambedkar also resorted to implore the British administration to ensure justice to the untouchables, and continued to educate his people about their rights and the need to stand on their own with improved self-respect and to prepare them for any confrontation with the established order.

**Burning the Manusmriti**

In August 1927, the Mahad municipality reversed its earlier decision to allow the untouchables to take water from the Chowdar Tank. Ambedkar asserted that this action would not overrule the rights of the untouchables but would only strengthen their resolve to fight for this right. On 25th December the volunteers gathered again in Mahad to launch their protest by taking water from the tank. This resolve to take water from the tank was not just to assert their rights but it was considered as a major action in the greater struggle for abolishing the very system of untouchability. Ambedkar explained to his followers the danger of seeking temporary solutions to the problems faced by the untouchables. Drawing on the lessons of the French Revolution he emphasised the need for abolishing the existing system. Here one can see that Ambedkar had gone a step further in his movement for the emancipation of the Dalits by adopting a larger goal for the overhauling of the Varna system. The assertion of the rights for taking drinking water and for, entering the Hindu temples became the steps leading to this ultimate goal.

Ambedkar exhorted his followers that the only class which can bring about social revolution is the depressed classes. One cannot expect the Brahmin class to give up the privileges they had been enjoying due to the hierarchic structure of the society. The non-Brahmin classes, the intermediary
between the untouchables and the Brahmins would not be committed to any principles and are weak in their aspiration for social revolution. Ambedkar addressed the volunteers:

We should accept that we are born to achieve this larger social purpose and should consider that to be our lives goal. Let us strive to gain that religious merit. Besides, this work (of bringing about social revolution) is in our interest and it is our duty to dedicate ourselves to remove the obstacles in our path.¹²

This radical thoughts reflect an influence of Marxism. The Marxists hold that a revolution leading to the establishment of a classless society is the responsibility of the proletarian or working class and the Communists can bring about a total revolution. Ambedkar also holds that annihilation of the caste and the establishment of a casteless society is the need and responsibility of the depressed classes.

The most significant event of the Mahad Satyagraha was the burning of a copy of ‘Manusmriti’, the sacred law book of the Hindus, on 25th December 1927. Though the act of burning ‘Manusmriti’ was not unplanned, fore seeing the explosiveness of the event, no publicity was given to it in advance. The resolution in this regard was moved by Gangadhar Neelkanth Sahasrabuddhe, a Brahmin associate of Ambedkar, and was seconded by P.N. Rajabhoj, an untouchable leader.

The burning of ‘Manusmrithi’ in the Mahad Satyagraha shook the caste - Hindus and gave rise to much criticism in the Hindu press. Ambedkar
justified this action in ‘Bahiskri Bharat’. He considered ‘Manusmriti’ as abusive and insulting in its treatment of the shudras and the untouchables; also social equality has never been supported by it. Hence, burning ‘Manusmriti’ should be considered an action meant to register strong protest against the idea of inequality it represented.

The major action of protest proposed for the satyagraha – drinking of water from the Chowder Tank – could not be carried out. Some of the caste - Hindu had obtained an interim injunction against allowing the untouchables to take water from the tank. The district collector also persuaded Ambedkar to postpone any action until the case had been decided upon by the court. But Ambedkar did not agree to it. However, he allowed the collector to address the conference after the matter had been discussed in the open session. The issue of Sathyagraha and the collector’s suggestion were discussed in the subject committee and it was reiterated to go ahead with the proposal to drink water from the tank. Even after collector’s address the decision was not suspended. However, the seriousness of the situation was discussed again by the leaders and a decision was taken to postpone the satyagraha for the time being and to organise a circumbulation of the tank by the delegates at that moment.

**Demand for Separate Electorate**

Ambedkar movement was hither to confined more or less to the Bombay presidency. His writings clarifying his positions on the struggle of the untouchables and its direction as well as those aimed at educating his people were in Marathi. Consequently his message had not reached the non-Marathi
speaking people. Despite he had some contact with some non-Brahmin leaders of the Madras Presidency, his audience were primarily the Maharashtrians. But, gradually his movement gained attention of the whole country. The two significant events that marked his appearance in the national political scene at this time was his disposition before the Simon Commission (the Indian Statutary Committee) and his critique of the (Motilal) Nehru Committee Report.

The congress had given a general call to boycott the Simon Commission and following this there was a country wide protest against the commission. But, Ambedkar decided to submit a memorandum to the Commission representing the grievances of the untouchables, on behalf of the Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha. Also, he gave evidence before the commission on 23, October 1928 and urged it to include provision for safeguarding the interests of the untouchables in any future constitutional framework. In the memorandum dated 29, May 1928 Ambedkar used the term Depressed Classes as synonymous with untouchables and made the following demands for the consideration of the Commission:

1. Adequate representation of the Depressed classes in the Legislature.
2. Guaranteeing the civil right of the Depressed classes as a minority.

Giving evidence before the Commission, Ambedkar emphasised the status of the depressed classes as a distinct community to be considered separately along with the Hindus, Muslims and other communities. He stated:

We must be treated as distinct minority separate from the Hindu community. Our minority character has been
hither to concealed by our inclusion in the Hindu community, but as a matter of fact there is really no link between the depressed classes and the Hindu Community. The first point, therefore is that we must be regarded as a distinct and independent minority. Secondly, I should like to submit that the depressed classes minority needs greater political protection than any other community in British India, for the simple reason that it is educationally very backward, that it is economically poor, socially enslaved and suffers certain grave political disabilities from which no other community suffers. Then I would submit that, as a matter of demand for political protection, we claim representation on the same basis as the Mohamedan minority. We claim reserved seats if accompanied by adult franchise\textsuperscript{14}.

This radical position that the untouchables are distinct from the Hindus indicates an ideological departure from his earlier stance where he had situated the depressed classes within in the Hindu fold itself. His demands reflect not only a vision to develop the Dalits into a potential power that can influence the decision making at the political level, but also an objective of establishing a new identity for the untouchables. He admits that the untouchables and the touchables might have grown and formed a part of one culture or religion but he disregards to consider them as parts of the same society.

He explained that though the caste Hindus and the outcaste untouchables
belong to one culture or civilization, they belong to separate societies, for culture and society are different from each other. He found no reason for the Dalits to form a part of the Hindus, as the latter had no basis to claim a community interest with the untouchables who had been treated as outcastes for centuries. It is this ideological conviction that led him later to give up Hinduism when he realised that neither Hinduism could be reformed on the foundation of the principles of equality nor the conditions of the Dalits be improved within the Hindu fold.

Ambedkar was very much critical of the Nehru Committee Report which had suggested the abolition of all community based constituencies except in the case of Muslims. The committee had also suggested a language based reconstruction of the provinces. Ambedkar severely critisised the committee on both the counts and said that they were against the national interest. He charged the above recommendation regarding community based constituencies as a move to perpetuate the Brahmin hegemony and to keep the untouchables away from power.

Though Ambedkar proclaimed the distinct socio-political identity of the depressed classes in his critique of Nehru Committee Report and the evidence presented to the Simon Commission, he had not yet made up his mind to declare a conversion. Explaining his position on the issue of conversion from Hinduism, opened up by the untouchables of Jalgaon, Ambedkar wrote in ‘Bahishkrit Bharat’ (15 March 1929):

“We are not ourselves ready as of today to change our religion. We still have the courage to fight for human
rights of the outcaste members of Hindu society and to overcome the obduracy of Hindu society and hope that we will be successful. Yet we cannot bring ourselves to dissuade those who being tired of Hindu society are now desirous of giving up Hinduism.”

Thus, though Ambedkar disentangled himself from the Hindu fold he did not see the time ripe for a conversion form Hinduism. However, he did not discourage those who desire to do so. He continued the fight within the space of the Hindu social order. Beside direct social actions in the form of mass public protests he had also started seeking legislative intervention to remove the social disabilities of the untouchables. The emphasis on separate electorate for the depressed classes stands significant in this regard.

**Ambedkar and Class Struggle**

Ambedkar’s perspective on the economic and class issues in the context of Dalit movement had taken its concrete shape by the late 1920s. This is very much embedded in his stands on the peasants and working class struggle. According to Omvedt there is a kind of parallelism in the issues as they confronted Ambedkar and other leaders; and Ambedkar approached them with the basic viewpoint of autonomy plus alliance:

In both cases Dalits were workers and they were peasants; but as workers they were invariably in the lowest paid and most unskilled industrial job and as peasants they were likely to be landless or poor peasants who spend most of the time working as wage labourers as well as toiling on the cesset-imposed tasks of untouchables. In both cases the ‘problem of entry’ — of getting jobs
and getting land – could sometimes override the question of organising the workers and peasants. In both the cases they faced problems of caste discrimination, unwillingness of caste Hindu workers and peasants to accept Dalit leadership; the differences were a greater severity in village customs on the one hand and the emerging role of communists on the other.  

Ambedkar lived most of his life among the industrial workers. Though he was not so directly involved with the textile workers, he was observing the efforts taken by the communists and others to organise them. He was also taking note of the problems of untouchables as they were being excluded from the higher paid weaving jobs and were, therefore, less represented in organising efforts. He was very much critical of the Indian communist’s tendency to ignore the problems of caste based discrimination towards the workers. Looking at the historic textile strike of 1928 from the perspective of Dalits cause. Ambedkar said

...... in the recent Bombay strike this matter was bought up prominently by me. I said to the members of the union that if they did not recognise the rights of the depressed classes to work in all the departments, I would rather dissuade the depressed classes from taking part in the strike. They afterwards consented, most reluctantly to include this as one of their demands and when they presented this to the mill owners the mill owners very rightly snubbed them and said that if this was an injustice, they certainly were not responsible for it.
In the second strike in 1929, which resulted in a massive defeat of Girni Kamgar Union, Ambedkar did ask the untouchable workers to go back. This was done with a view to put stress on the discriminatory treatment of the money lenders towards the striking untouchable and to protect them from a 'misdirected movement'. Ambedkar was quite irritated by the communists for ignoring the issues posed by the exclusion of the untouchable from employment in the textiles mills. He argued that the trade union movement must be distinguished from the communist movement which is a political movement aimed at revolution. His disagreement with the communists was not on their aim of creating a socialist society but about the use of violent means to do so.

On the issues of peasants and the problems of rural Mahrs, Ambedkar took an anti-landlord stand. In his debut speech in the Bombay Legislative Council he criticised the imposition of land tax on the peasants, even when they could not earn any profit. In 1928 when the non Brahmins organised the peasantry in opposition to a proposed ‘Small Holders Relief Bill’ Ambedkar supported them. In the Legislative Council he registered his dissent on the suggestions in the bill to consolidate smaller holdings. He argued that the consolidation of holdings could only push down the majority of small peasants in to landlessness while holdings would get concentrated under a single individual. He suggested that if consolidation of smaller holdings is felt necessary, it should be done to form small co-operative firms. Ambedkar had also supported the struggle of the peasants of Bardoli.

Apart from this support to the peasant movements in general, Ambedkar did begin in the 1920s to take up special problems of the Dalit peasants in...
particular. He campaigned against the 'Mahar Watan' which made the Mahar families to work as village servants at the mercy of feudal lords for a doubtful privilege of cultivating a piece of 'Watan' land and the right of begging for livelihood. He found that the 'Mahar Watan' had made the Mahars a permanent dependant of the landed gentry among caste Hindus.

Ambedkar brought the Hereditary Offices Act Amendment Bill before the Bombay Legislative Council, which sought to turn the Mahar and other untouchable village servants in to paid government servants, to do away with their various village hononariums and to commit their 'watan' land into ordinary private holdings. He considered the 'watan' as the greatest obstacle in the progress of Mahars. He warned the government that if nothing was done the result would be a war between the Revenue Department and the Mahars. According to Omvedt the Mahar Watan struggle led by Ambedkar which continued through out the 1930s and 1940s was the concrete form of the fight against feudalism which Marxists in many parts of India have struggled against with the general term 'Vethbegar'.

Another question which invited his attention was the 'problems of entry' of the Dalit agricultural labourer. According to Omvedt, Ambedkar adopted almost no programme or campaign for agricultural labourers as such; his main concern was that the Dalit should cease to be agricultural labourers, and that they should escape from their landlessess either by securing industrial or white - collar employment or by obtaining land for cultivation. The main type of land he wanted to be obtained by the untouchables was the government 'forest land' or 'waste land' much of which originally belonged to the village
communities. He had been raising questions about this in the Bombay Legislative Council in the late 1920s.

**Ambedkarism in the Making**

The exposition of Ambedkar movement attempted above unveils the form and direction which Ambedkar ideology had taken during the 1920s. The decade did witness the emergence of a vigourous movement of the depressed classes under the leadership of Ambedkar, almost entirely based on the Mahar caste in the Bombay Presidency. The movement decisively rejected the pro-Hindu 'integrationist' option represented by the Maratha leader V.R. Shinde and some of the Nagpur Dalit leaders, and chose instead a position of Dalit autonomy linked with a policy of general alliance with the non-Brahmin movement. It also reflected a policy of support for the struggles of the working class and peasants organised with a view to assure Dalit’s entry as workers and peasants by gaining jobs, land and education. The decade also witnessed the Mahad Sathyagraha, the declaration of the untouchable’s right to live as human beings.

The positions taken by Ambedkar in the 1920s on the status of the untouchables and the direction of their movements can be summarised in the following propositions.

1. The untouchables had historically been subjected to systematic exploitation by the caste-Hindus and untouchabitity was the result of Hinduism which perpetuated a social order based on graded inequality.

2. The philosophy of Hinduism equals the philosophy of Brahmanism
which remained inflexible and got frustrated at the efforts to reform its basic feature.

3. The untouchables constitute a definite entity distinct from the caste-Hindus. They might belong to the same religion, but in no way they were a part of the society to which the caste-Hindus belong.

4. The untouchables have to fight for establishing equality and justice and not to seek favours from the upper castes. The caste Hindus would not allow to reform the hierarchic structure and build up a free social order.

5. The untouchables would also seek to attain legitimate equalitarian goals and special protection in the political, economic and educational spheres, within the fold of Hinduism as far as possible, but would not mind abandoning the Hindu religion if it becomes necessary.

Thus, Ambedkar movement in the 1920s was in the process of a major shift from its early position of fighting for the rights of the Dalits through protests within the space of Hinduism. It was a presage to the political mobilization of the Dalits, to the adoption of constitutional means for safeguarding their interests and for a total rejection of the Hindu religion.

Note:

1 Cited in Gore, P. 75
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid, p.76.
4 Ibid.
5 Cited in Kadam, K.N, Opct, P77.
7 Cited in Gore, Ibid, p.91.
8 Cited in Gore, Ibid.
11 Ibid
13 Writings and Speeches, Volume 2, P. 428-58.
15 Gore , p.113.
16 Ibid p.118.
17 Omvedt, p.154.
18 Ibid.
19 Writings and Speeches, Volume 2, P. 474.
20 Omvedt, p.154.
21 Ibid (Bahishkrit Bharath).
23 Writings and Speeches. Volume 2, P. 134.
24 Ibid, p.87.
26 Ibid.
28 Omvedt, p.158.