

# Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Contribution to the Revival of Buddhism in Modern India: A Historical Perspective

**Dr. Hemappa B. Kenchalli**

Assistant Professor, Department of History  
Priyadarshni First Grade College Rattihalli, India  
hbkenchalli@gmail.com

**Abstract:** *Buddhism is one of the major religions in the world. It is a world religion, which arose in India, and is based on the teachings of Siddhārtha Gautama who was deemed a "Buddha" (Enlightened human being). Buddhism has been reemerging in India since the past century, due to its adoption by many Indian intellectuals, the migration of Buddhist Tibetan exiles, and the mass conversion of hundreds of thousands of Hindu Dalits led by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar was greatly impressed by studying Tipitaka, the collection of Buddha's sayings. He said that India would rise once again to its glory, when people turn to Buddhism and practice the high ethical principles preached by Buddha. After publishing a series of books and articles arguing that Buddhism was the only way for the Dalits to gain equality, Ambedkar publicly converted on 14 October 1956, at Deekshabhoomi, Nagpur. After receiving ordination, Ambedkar gave dhamma diksha to his followers. The ceremony included 22 vows given to all new converts after 'Three Jewels' and 'Five Precepts'. Even though Ambedkar had been a follower of Buddhism for barely seven weeks, during that small period he contributed immensely for the promotion of Buddhism. At the time of his death around seven lakh Dalits had become Buddhists. He saw Buddhism as a religion based on wisdom and compassion, which supports tolerance and human rights, and fulfils the deep spiritual needs of people. Thus Ambedkar's contribution to the revival of Buddhism in contemporary India is very significant.*

**Keywords:** Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Revival of Buddhism in India, Twenty-two vows of Ambedkar

## I. INTRODUCTION

Buddhism is one of the major religions in the world. It is a world religion, which arose in India, and is based on the teachings of Siddhārtha Gautama who was deemed a "Buddha" ("Enlightened human being"). Buddhism spread outside India starting in the Buddha's lifetime. With the reign of the Buddhist Mauryan Emperor Ashoka, the Buddhist community split into two branches: the Mahāsāṃghika and the Sthaviravāda, each of which spread throughout India and split into numerous sub sects. In modern times, two major branches of Buddhism exist: the Theravāda in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, and the Mahāyāna throughout the Himalayas and East Asia.

After peaking after Ashoka in ancient India, the practice of Buddhism and Buddhist monasteries received laity and royal support through the 12th century, but generally declined in the 1st millennium CE, with many of its practices and ideas absorbed into Hinduism. Except for

Himalayan region and south India, Buddhism almost became extinct in India after the arrival of Islam in late 12<sup>th</sup> century. Buddhism remains the primary or a major religion in the Himalayan areas such as Sikkim, Ladakh, Arunachal Pradesh, the Darjeeling hills in West Bengal, and the Lahaul and Spiti areas of upper Himachal Pradesh. Remains have also been found in Andhra Pradesh, the origin of Mahayana Buddhism. Buddhism has been reemerging in India since the past century, due to its adoption by many Indian intellectuals, the migration of Buddhist Tibetan exiles, and the mass conversion of hundreds of thousands of Hindu Dalits led by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.

## II. NEO-BUDDHIST MOVEMENT

A Buddhist revivalist movement among Dalit Indians was initiated in 1890s by socialist leaders such as Iyothee Thass, Bhagya Reddy Varma, and Damodar Dharmananda Kosambi. In the 1950s, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar turned his attention to Buddhism and travelled to Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) to attend a convention of Buddhist scholars and monks.

Ambedkar visited Sri Lanka at the invitation of the Young Men's Buddhist Association, Colombo, where he addressed a meeting of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Kandy and appealed the downtrodden of Sri Lanka to embrace Buddhism. In 1951, he compiled the *Bauddha Upasana Patha*, a small collection of Buddhist devotional texts. While dedicating a new Buddhist Vihara near Pune, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar announced that he was writing a book on Buddhism and as soon as it was finished, he has planned to make a formal conversion to Buddhism. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar twice visited Burma in 1954; the second time in order to attend the third conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Rangoon. In 1955, he founded the Bharatiya Bauddha Mahasabha, or the Buddhist Society of India. He completed his final work, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, in 1956. It was published posthumously. After meetings with the Sri Lankan Buddhist monk Hammalawa Saddhatissa, Ambedkar organized a formal public ceremony for himself and his supporters in Nagpur on 14 October 1956. Accepting the "Three Refuges" and "Five Precepts" from a Buddhist monk in the traditional manner, Ambedkar completed his own conversion. He then proceeded to convert an estimated five lakh of his supporters who were gathered around him. Taking the 22 Vows, Ambedkar and his supporters explicitly condemned and rejected Hinduism and Hindu philosophy. This was the world's biggest mass religious conversion; it is celebrated by Buddhists every year at Nagpur; 1-1.5 million Buddhists gather there every year for the ceremony. He then traveled to Kathmandu in Nepal to attend the Fourth World Buddhist Conference. His final manuscript, *The Buddha or Karl Marx*, remains unfinished; he died on 6 December 1956.

### III. AMBEDKAR'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE REVIVAL OF BUDDHISM IN INDIA

Ambedkar had been studying about other religions for a long time so that he could choose the appropriate religion for himself and his followers. He was greatly impressed by studying Tipitaka, the collection of Buddha's sayings. He said that India would rise once again to its glory, when people turn to Buddhism and practice the high ethical principles preached by Buddha. He further said, "It was during Brahminical period that Buddhism was born. Buddhism opposed inequality, authority and division of society into various castes. Equality is the main feature of Buddhism. The Dhamma of Buddha gives freedom of thought and freedom of self development.

At the Yeola conference in 1935, B. R. Ambedkar who has become a prominent Indian leader and first law minister declared that he would not die a Hindu, saying that it perpetuates caste injustices. Ambedkar was approached by various leaders of different denominations and faiths. Meetings were held to discuss the question of Dalits and the pros and cons of conversion. Buddhist monk Lokanatha visited Ambedkar's residence at Dadar on 10 June 1936 and tried to persuade him to embrace Buddhism. Later in an interview to the press, Lokanatha said that Ambedkar was impressed with Buddhism and that his own ambition was to convert all Dalits to Buddhism. In 1937, Lokanatha published a pamphlet *Buddhism Will Make You Free*, dedicated to the "Depressed Classes" of India from his press in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). In early 1940s, Ambedkar visited Acharya Ishvardatt Medharthi's Buddhupuri School in Kanpur. Medharthi had earlier been initiated into Buddhism by Lokanatha, and by the mid-1940s, he had close contacts with Ambedkar. For a short while, Ambedkar also took Pali classes from Medharthi in Delhi. Bodhananda Mahastavir and Ambedkar first met in 1926 at the "Indian Non-Brahmin Conference" convened by Shahaji II.

After publishing a series of books and articles arguing that Buddhism was the only way for the Dalits to gain equality, Ambedkar publicly converted on 14 October 1956, at Deekshabhoomi, Nagpur. He took the 'Three Refuges' and 'Five Precepts' from a Buddhist monk, Bhadant U Chandramani, in the traditional manner, and in his turn administered them to the 600,000 of his followers who were present. The conversion ceremony was attended by Medharathi, his main disciple Bhoj Dev Mudit, and Mahastvir Bodhanand's Sri Lankan successor, Bhante Pragyanand. Ambedkar asked Dalits not to get entangled in the existing branches of Buddhism, and called his version Navayana or 'Neo-Buddhism'. Ambedkar would die less than two months later, just after finishing his definitive work on Buddhism. Many Dalits employ the term "Ambedkar Buddhism" to designate the Buddhist movement, which started with Ambedkar's conversion. Many converted people call themselves "Nava-Bauddhas" i.e. Neo-Buddhists.

### IV. TWENTY-TWO VOWS OF AMBEDKAR

After receiving ordination, Ambedkar gave *dhamma diksha* to his followers. The ceremony included 22 vows given to all new converts after 'Three Jewels' and 'Five Precepts'. On 14 October 1956 at Nagpur, Ambedkar performed another mass religious conversion ceremony at Chandrapur. He prescribed 22 vows to his followers:

- I shall have no faith in Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara, nor shall I worship them.
- I shall have no faith in Rama and Krishna, who are believed to be incarnation of God, nor shall I worship them.
- I shall have no faith in Gauri, Ganapati and other gods and goddesses of Hindus, nor shall I worship them.
- I do not believe in the incarnation of God.
- I do not and shall not believe that Lord Buddha was the incarnation of Vishnu. I believe this to be sheer madness and false propaganda.
- I shall not perform *Shraddha* nor shall I give *pind*.
- I shall not act in a manner violating the principles and teachings of the Buddha.
- I shall not allow any ceremonies to be performed by Brahmins.
- I shall believe in the equality of man.
- I shall endeavor to establish equality.
- I shall follow the Noble Eightfold Path of the Buddha.
- I shall follow the ten *paramitas* prescribed by the Buddha.
- I shall have compassion and loving-kindness for all living beings and protect them.
- I shall not steal.
- I shall not tell lies.
- I shall not commit carnal sins.
- I shall not take intoxicants like liquor, drugs, etc.
- (The previous four proscriptive vows [14–17] are from the Five Precepts.)
- I shall endeavor to follow the Noble Eightfold Path and practice compassion and loving-kindness in everyday life.
- I renounce Hinduism, which disfavors humanity and impedes the advancement and development of humanity because it is based on inequality, and adopt Buddhism as my religion.
- I firmly believe the Dhamma of the Buddha is the only true religion.
- I consider that I have taken a new birth.
- I solemnly declare and affirm that I shall hereafter lead my life according to the teachings of Buddha's Dhamma.

### **Buddhism in India after Ambedkar's Death**

The Buddhist movement was somewhat hindered by Ambedkar's death so shortly after his conversion. It did not receive the immediate mass support from the Dalit population that Ambedkar had hoped for. Division and lack of direction among the leaders of the Ambedkarite movement have been an additional impediment. Buddhism is the fifth-largest religion in India and 6% of the population of Maharashtra, but less than 1% of the overall population of India. The Buddhist revival remains concentrated in two states: Ambedkar's native Maharashtra, and Uttar Pradesh, the land of Bodhanand Mahastavir, Acharya Medharthi and their associates.

### **V. CONCLUSION**

Even though Ambedkar had been a follower of Buddhism for barely seven weeks, during that small period he contributed immensely for the promotion of Buddhism. At the time of his death around seven lakh Dalits had become Buddhists, and in the months that followed hundreds of thousands more took the similar step-despite the uncertainty created by the sudden loss of their leader. Throughout his lifetime Ambedkar realized that political and legal rights would never be enough to free people from the social and cultural discrimination of the Hindu caste system. He decided that the solution was to accept other religion i.e. Buddhism. In 1956 he took the momentous step of publicly converting to Buddhism in Nagpur and encouraging similar conversions throughout India. He saw Buddhism as a modern religion that is based on wisdom and compassion, which supports tolerance and human rights, and speaks to the deep spiritual needs of all people. Thus Ambedkar's contribution to the revival of Buddhism in contemporary India is very significant.

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