

# **Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Embodiment of Political Social and Spiritual Empowerment to Dalits**

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## **1. Introduction**

India declared itself a modern democratic nation-state after attaining freedom from British colonial empire in 1947. Soon after moving towards democratization India adopted its own Constitution on 26th November 1949, after spending 2 year 11 months and 18 days long discussion in Constituent Assembly, though full functioning of the constitution finally began on 26<sup>th</sup> January 1950. India is considered among the world's most diverse country in the today's time, with regard to different religion, identity, culture and ethnicity. The country is also a birthplace of world is four vital religions namely: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Hindus comprise near about 80 percent part of the population, rest 20 percent part of population comprises of other remaining religions. According to the Constitution, freedom of religion and expression is a fundamental guarantee that is clearly enshrined in fundamental rights. Thus, so far the Indian Constitution has proved as a safeguard of citizen's rights and crusader of democratic values. The Indian Constitution also became the savior of downtrodden people's and weaker section's rights in Indian society. All forms of discriminations are strictly prohibited by the Indian constitution and it strongly prohibits untouchability too.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) widely recognized as the chief architect of the constitution as he was the head of the drafting committee, which was mainly responsible for constitution making. Ambedkar also served as independent India's first law minister in Nehru cabinet. He is among one of the tallest figures of modern India. The insights provided by Ambedkar during constitution making are very essential. The socio-political understanding and philosophy of Ambedkar has deeply shaped the development process and foundation of the Indian constitution. Beside this Ambedkar had also played many noteworthy roles such as strong campaigner of human rights, champion of women and labors rights, education- list, lawyer, legislator, agitator, writer, cabinet minister, etc. Ambedkar 'published important books on many topics, including federalism, theology and philosophy, finance, language, constitutionalism, not least, the sociology, politics and history of caste system.'<sup>1</sup> Definitely Ambedkar's writings covered almost every subject of humanities. His unmatched and monumental contribution towards nation makes him champion of democracy. In this context Valerian Rodrigues highlights that, "It would have been a different India without him and, in all probability, a much more inequitable and unjust one."<sup>2</sup>

Ambedkar had fought long battle throughout his life against untouchability and caste based social discrimination. The very unjust and exploitive nature of Hindu religion towards untouchables and some other related cause provoked Ambedkar to denounce Hinduism. Finally, during the last phase of his life,

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<sup>1</sup> Guha, Ramachandra, (2012), *Makers of Modern India*, New Delhi : Penguin, 207

<sup>2</sup> Rodrigues, Valerian, (2015), *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*, New Delhi : Oxford, 1

on 14 October 1956 Ambedkar converted to Buddhism in Nagpur (Maharashtra) with lakhs of his followers. By converting to Buddhism, Ambedkar and his followers were seeking equality, liberty and fraternity. According to Ambedkar, Buddhism would start a new era of liberation and establish egalitarian society for untouchables, which they could never achieve in Hinduism. Before deciding to embrace Buddhism, Ambedkar had studied about different religions but finally he gave preference to Buddhism over other religions. The purpose of this chapter is to locate Ambedkar's combat against Hinduism with the intention of getting emancipation for untouchables. This chapter is divided into two parts. First part aims to provide Ambedkar's firm criticism of Hinduism and second part discusses about Ambedkar inclination towards to Buddhism in later period of his life.

## **2. AMBEDKAR'S VIEW ON RELIGION:**

*“Religion is for Man, Man is not for Religion” — Ambedkar*

Ambedkar observed religion as an essential part of life and development of mankind. He wanted religion, but he did not want discrimination in the name of religion. Religion, to him, was the driving force for human activity. In Ambedkar words, “Religion must mainly be a matter of principles only. It cannot be a matter of rules. The moment it degenerates into rules it ceases to be religion, as It kills responsibility, which is the essence of a truly religious act.”<sup>3</sup> Ambedkar was not against to the religion but he firmly believed that the nature of any religion should be

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<sup>3</sup> Moon, Vasant, (2014), *Dr. Babasahed Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol – 1, New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 75

egalitarian. According to Ambedkar, “religion must be judged by social standards, based on social ethics.”<sup>4</sup> He further remarked, “Religion is necessary for a free society. Not every Religion is worth having. Religion must relate to facts of life and not to theories and speculations about God, or Soul or Heaven or Earth. It is wrong to make God the centre of Religion. It is wrong to make salvation of the soul as the centre of Religion. It is wrong to make animal sacrifices to be the centre of religion. Real Religion lives in the heart of man and not in the Shastras. Man and morality must be the centre of Religion. If not, Religion is a cruel superstition.”<sup>5</sup> For him humanism is an essential part of any religion, with its core ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity.

Throughout his life Ambedkar had to see the ugly side of Hindu religion. He had perceived that in Hinduism there is no breathing space for untouchables those who were looking for equal life and recognition and there is very less expectation that one day Hindu religion would treat everyone equally. Ambedkar assumed that upper caste people were completely reluctant to accept untouchables in the fold of Hindu religion and their behavior with untouchables were worse than slaves. Therefore, in last decade of his life he decided to convert to Buddhism to get rid from Hinduism. The foremost purpose of his conversion was to put an end to the age long continuation of caste based discrimination and untouchability that was a perpetual part of Hindu religion.

## **2.1 Hindu Religion: A Critical Outlook**

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 94

<sup>5</sup> Moon, Vasant, (2014), *Dr. Babasahed Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol – 1, New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 75

*“Inequality is the soul of Hinduism” — Ambedkar*

Being born in an untouchable family, Ambedkar had to experience the horrible aspect of caste based discrimination that was the essential part of Hindu religion. Ambedkar had renounced Hinduism and had adopted Buddhism as his mark of protest against the prevalent caste system in Hindu religion. Gail Omvedt analyzed that “Ambedkar has not begun his political career with a focus on religion or a concern with rejecting Hinduism. His dedication of study was focused on economic and social issues. His earliest essay on caste, written in 1916, did not analyse it as irrevocably linked to Hinduism.”<sup>6</sup> The battle of emancipation for untouchables was taking shape thereafter. The large number of Ambedkar’s writings, readings, speeches and movement become the foremost voice of downtrodden peoples and all these initiatives of Ambedkar launched direct attack against Hindu religion, Hindu social order, and Hindu religious scripts as well. ‘Philosophy of Hinduism’, ‘Annihilation of Caste’, and ‘Riddles in Hinduism’ are considered amongst some of his main works, which carries out a firm assault on Hinduism. Through his published and unpublished works Ambedkar has thoroughly condemned Hinduism particularly the Hindu social order, Varna system, Religious scriptures of Hinduism, Hindu laws and Manu Smriti.

In the fold of Hindu religion, the social order is based on theory of Chaturvarna means division of society into four unequal classes. This order of repression does not recognize the idea of liberty, equality and fraternity. According to Ambedkar,

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<sup>6</sup> Omvedt, Gail, (2004), Ambedkar towards an Enlightenment India, New Delhi: Penguin, 56

religion is, 'which governs people', but when this definition is applied to Hindu Religion, which is based on unjust society, one must find that there is no place for an individual. Hindu religion does not teach how an individual should behave with another individual. A religion which does not recognize individual per se is not personally acceptable to Ambedkar'. In this regard he raised a question by saying, 'Three factors are required for the uplift of an individual. They are Sympathy, Equality and Liberty. Can you say by experience that any of these factors exist for you in Hinduism?'<sup>7</sup> Therefore, here it is necessary to highlight that after giving enough time to investigate about Hinduism; Ambedkar found that Hindu religious texts and scriptures are one of the main reasons behind the pathetic condition of untouchables in society, which enforced them to live vulnerable life. In this context, Gopal Guru rightly pointed out how Hindu law based on the four varnas established an elaborate caste system. According to Ambedkar, "Hindu law is that law of the established order and was made by the touchables. The untouchables had nothing to do except to obey it and respect it, for them there is no equal right, no justice. Ambedkar further maintained that the establishment order was based on graded inequality and was legitimized by Hindu law which completely neglected the idea of equality, fraternity, liberty, democracy and human rights."<sup>8</sup> Therefore, it can be argued that Varna system gave preference to caste based hierarchy over to equality and Hindu religious law were being

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<sup>7</sup> Massey, James, (2003), *Dr. B.R. Ambedkar a Study in Just Society*, New Delhi : Manohar Publishers, 29

<sup>8</sup> Guru, Gopal (2002), *Ambedkar's Idea of Social Justice in Ghanshyam Shah, Dalits and the State*, New Delhi: Concept publishing company, 41

meant on the basics of different things to different caste and people. In this hierarchical model, untouchables could never attain equal rights and justice due to 'graded inequality', which strongly favored elevation of some and degradation of others. 'The principle of graded inequality runs through the whole of the Manu Smriti. There is no department of life in which he has not introduced his principle of graded inequality.'<sup>9</sup>

Ambedkar had seen Varna system similar to that of the class system. In the hierarchal caste model an individual is not treated on her and his merit but as a class, that means an individual is recognized on the basis of caste rather than as human. Therefore, Ambedkar raised a very rational question, "Does the Hindu social order recognize equality? The answer must be in a negative. That men are born equal is a doctrine which is repugnant to the Hindu social order. In the spiritual sense it treats the doctrine as false. According to the Hindu social order though it is true that men are the children of Prajapati the Creator of the Universe, they are not equal on that account. For, they were created from the different parts of the body of Prajapati. The Brahmins were created from the mouth, the Kshatriyas from the arms, the Vaishyas from his thighs and Shudras from his feet. The limbs from which they were created being of unequal value the men thus created are as unequal. In the biological sense, the Hindu social order does not bother to examine whether the doctrine is founded in a fact."<sup>10</sup> That means Hindu social order does not treat humans equally and it also ignores one's personal capacity as well. Because of this

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<sup>9</sup> Moon, Vol-3, (2014), 317

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 106

unjust social order, higher caste get more benefits and opportunities, on the other side economic, social, educational, political concerns of lower caste were being totally neglected. In this respect, Dhananjay Keer observes that “In Ambedkar’s view the caste system is a social division of the people belonging to the same race, is a division of labor and also a division of laborers compelling a man to engage himself in a calling which may not appeal to him. Reorganization of Hindu society based on Chaturvarna is impossible and harmful because the Varna system has a tendency to degenerate into the caste system. It prohibits the Shudras from pursuing knowledge, engaging in economic enterprise and from bearing arms with the result that they could never revolt and became reconciled to their fate.”<sup>11</sup> 1Ambedkar subsequently contended that caste system is the base of graded inequality. In this context, the four varnas are not only different but also unequal in social status and hierarchy. In this model one stands above the others and distribution of social wealth and benefits are also unequal, particularly for untouchables. People those who belong from higher caste receive more benefits than remaining lower caste. Occupation and social status were also being made on the basis of graded inequality. Amhedkar “criticized the theologicalrongly religious concept of justice on the ground that it was limited to devotees and failed to attack the Chaturvarna system which was mainly responsible for perpetuating the structure of inequality.”<sup>12</sup> This means that graded inequality was the main reason behind determining people’s occupation and social position in the society.

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<sup>11</sup> Keer, Dhananjay, (1971), *Dr. Ambedkar Life and Mission*, Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 269

<sup>12</sup> Guru, (2002), 41



Ambedkar had also raised the questions against Hindu social laws and religious scriptures. According to Ambedkar, “The Hindu social order does not recognize the individual as a centre of social purpose. For the Hindu social order is based primarily on class or Varna and not on individuals. Originally and formally the Hindu social order recognized four classes: (1) Brahmins, (2) Kshatriya (3) Vaishya and (4) Shudras. Today it consists of five classes, the fifth being called the Panchamas or Untouchables.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Ambedkar criticized ‘Hindu Dharma-Shastras’ and strongly condemned them because they do not consider humans as human beings and further he felt that in the fold of Hindu religion there is no scope for untouchables to be treated as human beings. In this regard Ambedkar further mentioned, ‘if the individual has a privilege it is not because it is due to him personally. The privilege goes with the class, and if he is found to enjoy it, it is because he belongs to that class. Contrawise, if an individual is suffering from a wrong, it is not because he by his conduct deserves it. The disability is the disability imposed upon the class and if he is found to be laboring under it, it is because he belongs to that class.’<sup>14</sup> Therefore, it is understandable that due to the serious influence of Hindu religious scriptures and laws in their day to day way of life the privileged touchables were totally reluctant and very insensitive towards to unprivileged untouchable’s basic rights.

Ambedkar’s efforts related to ‘Temple Entry’ for untouchables also can be seen in the light of his significant

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<sup>13</sup> Moon, Vol-3, (2014), 99-100

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

criticism against Hinduism. The famous Nasik Saiyagraha<sup>15</sup> for the entry of untouchables to the Kalaram Temple began in March, 1930 and continued till April 1936. Unfortunately this movement ended without any result. It is believed that it was the first incident, when Ambedkar openly showed off his desire to quit Hindu religion and convert to some other religion where entrance of untouchables in religious places won't be prohibited and they would be treated equally. In this context, Eleanor Zelliot highlights that "In Mooknayak"<sup>16</sup>, Ambedkar 's first newspaper, started in 1920, he wrote, "we are not yet ready to give an answer to the question of whether the Untouchables should have a temple of their own or attempt to enter the Hindu temple."<sup>17</sup> Ambedkar said that the image of God in temple should be accessible to all who wanted to worship it, without any discrimination, binding and condition. He said that temples were meant for use by all Hindus, since they called themselves untouchable Hindus, they were entitled to entry into the temples to worship the deity."<sup>18</sup> Later Ambedkar made many other attempts with his followers for seeking permission and claiming their right to temple entry in different parts of Maharashtra. But finally when he could not succeed in his efforts for securing their human rights, he told to his followers by asserting that if your religion does not offer you equality, freedom and sympathy then

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<sup>15</sup> *Satyagraha*- A policy of passive political resistance, especially that advocated and adopted by Mahatma Gandhi against British rule in India and by Ambedkar as well for temple entry for Untouchables.

<sup>16</sup> On 31 January 1920, Ambedkar started 'Mooknayak'. Chatrapati Shahauji Maharaj had donated Rs 2500 as seed money to start this newspaper. This Marathi weekly newspaper championed the causes of the depressed classes.

<sup>17</sup> Zelliot, Eleanor, (2013), *Ambedkar World: The Making of Babasaheb and dalit Movement*, New Delhi: Navayana, 143

<sup>18</sup> Keer, (1971), 95-96

time has come to denounce this religion and select only that religion in which you will get equal status, equal opportunity and equal treatment.

Burning of Manusmriti by Ambedkar on 25 December, 1927 with his followers also has a very significant impact in the history of dalit liberation and that daring initiative of Ambedkar was also considered among one of his strong straight attacks on Hinduism and Brahminical orthodoxy. Ambedkar symbolically burnt Manusmriti to deny Brahmins monopoly and caste hierarchy. After burning Manusmriti, Ambedkar said, "The bonfire of Manusmriti was quite intentional. It was a very cautious and drastic step, but was taken with a view of forcing the attention of caste Hindus."<sup>19</sup> He further added that "We made a bonfire of it because we view it as a symbol of injustice under which we have been crushed for centuries."<sup>20</sup> Basically the decision to burn Manusmriti was taken for the duration of the Mahad Satyagraha on 20 March, 1927. Mahad movement was an attempt under the leadership of Ambedkar to allow untouchables to use water in a public tank because using water from that tank was banned for untouchables since ages. Mahad movement was a fight against age-old discriminatory customs of Hinduism. Though the movement did not succeed in its main purpose but one noteworthy resolution was taken at that point of time to burn Manusmriti, which is also responsible for untouchables' social, economic, religious degradation.

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, 106

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*,

‘Hinduism is a political ideology of the same character as the Fascist or Nazi ideology and is thoroughly antidemocratic.’<sup>21</sup> Ambedkar firmly believed that Hinduism and its branches are the main cause behind the deprivation of untouchables which snatched the equality, freedom and prosperity from the life of untouchables. Hindu laws are totally unjust because they are not the same for one class as of another. Ambedkar further exposed that the untouchables are living very pathetic and low standard life in Hindu society because of caste based hierarchy, which became the perpetual part of the Hindu Religion. Untouchables suffered most to attain equal rights and equal social status as human beings in the fold of Hindu religion. Therefore, for Ambedkar it became inevitable to embrace a religion which would able to provide equal status, equal rights and respect to untouchables. After a comparative study of different religions, Ambedkar concluded that Buddhism is the only religion which would fulfill the desire of untouchables. The foremost purpose of his conversion movement was to put an end to the age long continuation of caste based discrimination and untouchability that has become perpetual part of Hindu religion. In last decade of his life, Ambedkar decided that the time has come to denounce Hinduism and to embrace Buddhism.

### **3. AMBEDKAR AND BUDDHISM**

Ambedkar’s journey towards Buddhism can be seen during a period of near about forty years in which he has experienced the bitter side of Hinduism. Inbetween, Ambedkar made many

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<sup>21</sup> Sontakke, Y.D, (2004), *Thoughts of Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar*, New Delhi: Samyak Prakashan, 257

successful attempts to condemn Hinduism and also launched several attacks for challenging its orthodoxy. In 1944, with the purpose to provide education to everyone, Ambedkar founded 'People's Education Society' in Bombay. Thereafter, on 20 June 1946, Ambedkar started one college in Bombay and named it Siddhartha College of Arts and Science. In 1948, he wrote a foreword to L. Narasu's book 'The Essence of Buddhism'. In his search for the original texts, he began to learn Pali. From 1949 he had been propagating Buddhism in private discussions. In 1950 he published an article in the Journal of the Mahabodhi Society entitled 'The Buddha and the Future of His Religion', in which he argued that Buddhism was a religion for the whole world.'<sup>22</sup> Ambedkar had given sufficient time to study Buddhism in his life and around 1950 he gave his full attention to Buddhism. In 1950, Ambedkar went to Colombo (Sri Lanka) to attend the 'World Buddhist Conference'. In 1954, Ambedkar visited to Rangoon (Burma) in order to attend the 'Third World Buddhists Conference'. In 1955, he founded the Bharatiya Buddha Mahasabha. On 24 May 1956 he declared on the day of Buddha Jayanti celebrations at Nare Park in Bombay that he would embrace Buddhism in October 1956. On 23 September 1956, he issued a press note announcing that his conversion to Buddhism would take place at Nagpur on the day of Dussehra. Finally on 14 October, 1956 Ambedkar converted into Buddhism along with laths of his followers, family members, friends and well-wishers. Ambedkar gave preference to Nagpur community over the other places, because Nagpur has a great significance in Buddhist history and also was a historic town where the Nagas

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<sup>22</sup> Omvedt, (2004), 148

community flourished Buddhism in ancient times. Ambedkar's ideas about Buddhism can be seen through his writings and some article that he wrote during his life. He completed his leading work on Buddhism titled 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' in 1956 and it was first published in 1957 after his death.

Before taking any serious attempt to conversion into Buddhism Ambedkar had given sufficient time to study about Sikhism. Islam, and Christianity also but finally he gave preference to Buddhism above other because he believed that Buddhism is the only religion which is able to provide improved equal social, political, economic life to untouchables. In this context Dhananjay Keer mentioned that 'Ambedkar also declared that he would propagate Buddhism in India. He had already achieved several things to that end, the provision for the study of Pali made in the Constitution, the inscription of a Buddhist aphorism on the frontage of the Rashtrapati Bhavan in Dethi and acceptance of the Asoka Chakra by India as her symbol and declaration of Buddha Jayanti a holiday mainly through his efforts.'<sup>23</sup>

### **3.1 Conversion to Buddhism**

Since 1935, Ambedkar seriously had been contemplating about changing of his religion by denouncing Hinduism. However, he was very careful in choosing the new religion. After spending a great deal of time on reading about different religion, he finally decided that he would embrace Buddhism. During the last phase of his life Ambedkar had to survive with some health

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<sup>23</sup> Keer, (1971), 481

issues, which created anxiety to his family and among the followers. So after much consultation with some of his close aides about conversion he finally announced that he would embrace Buddhism and that moment came on October 14, 1956 at Nagpur. By accepting the Three Refuge and Five Precepts from a Buddhist monk in the traditional manner, Ambedkar completed his own conversion. He then proceeded to convert some 500,000 of his supporters who were come from all around the country. He prescribed the 22 vows for these converts, after the three jewels and five precepts. For fulfilling the procedure of conversion Ambedkar invited Bhikku Chandran<sup>24</sup>ani from Kushinara district of Gorakhpur (U.P). He then traveled to Kathmandu (Nepal) on 20 November, 1956 to attend the Fourth World Buddhist Conference, where he delivered his famous speech 'Buddha or Karl Marx'. 'The conversion of Dalits from Hinduism to other religions was one of the main agendas of Ambedkar's life since he fully believed that this was the only way for their liberation. He reached this conclusion after struggling for more than two decades for the basic human rights of the Dalits within the Hindu-fold.'<sup>24</sup> Ambedkar persuaded long battle through his endless efforts against the disease of Hindu religion particularly untouchability, but during the last decade of his life he realized that liberation of untouchables now can be achieved through conversion only. Therefore, it resulted in Ambedkar inclination towards to Buddhism for achieving equal right in society for untouchables.

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<sup>24</sup> Massey, (2003), 24

At a meeting of Depressed Classes on 13th October, 1935 at Nasik (Yeola) district Maharashtra, Ambedkar had affirmed about his desire to denounce his religion, this event is considered as where Ambedkar first candidly showed his wish to change Hindu religion. He then said that 'he was born as a Hindu but will not die as Hindu'. According to Ambedkar, "Unfortunately, I was born a Hindu untouchable. It was beyond my power to prevent that, but it is within my power to refuse to live under ignoble[shameful] and humiliating conditions. I solemnly assure you that I will not die a Hindu."<sup>25</sup> Near about a year passed away to his declaration, a huge Mahar conference was held on May 30 and 31, 1936, in Mumbai, to assess the impact of that declaration on Mahar community. In his address to the conference, Ambedkar expressed his views on conversion in an elaborate, well-prepared, and written speech in Marathi. By 1935, Ambedkar had lost all hope that Hinduism could be reformed ever. At Yeola, Nasik (1935), he suggested that people who belonged to these classes should give up Hinduism. In May 1936, he called a conference of conversion which provoked widespread reaction. Although some dialogue was initiated, particularly with the Sikhs, he was to put off the issue of conversion for the next twenty years. His later writing demonstrate that he did not forget about the issue and took to an intense study of Hinduism and comparative religions for the next twenty years, Ambedkar wrote a long speech called Annihilation of Caste in 1936 to address the Jat Pat Todak Mandal, an organization for social reforms based in Lahore, as it

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<sup>25</sup> Sontakke, (2004), 204



invited him to preside over their annual conference.<sup>26</sup> In this master-piece Ambedkar thoroughly criticized the caste system or social hierarchy, which became perpetual part of Hindu religion. Therefore, Ambedkar reached to conclusion that changing the Hindu religion was the only option left.

Beltz Johannes has analyzed that Ambedkar's thoughts on the subject of conversion are important at two levels. On one hand, Ambedkar, who himself belonged to an untouchable caste, was the brain behind of collective conversion of the Mahars to Buddhism; on the other hand, he studied Indian society with relevant sociological tools. According to him, the endogamous nature of the caste system is its main characteristic. The caste system is the result of matrimonial exclusivity introduced by Brahmans and has been internalized by Indian society as a whole. Ambedkar understood the ramifications of caste on economic, political and religious life. He knew it was the cause of the endless segmentation of society, restrictions regarding education, and the denial of access and inequitable distribution of public possessions. He was familiar with his community and knew that the idea of caste, legitimized by the Hindu religion, was an integral part of Hindu society at every level.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, Ambedkar had very firm belief that Buddhism has all those characteristics which has the potential to embrace untouchable's life and would also provide them all equal socio-economic rights.

Before reaching to his final conclusion to convert to Buddhism, Ambedkar had given sufficient time to study about

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<sup>26</sup> Rodrigues, (2007), 12-13

<sup>27</sup> Johannes, Beltz, (2005), Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit Religious Conversion and Socio-Political Emancipation, New Delhi: Manohar Publication, 35-36

other religion. Sikhism was the first choice of Ambedkar for conversion. In April, 1936 Ambedkar visited to Amritsar accompanied by his followers for addressing a Sikh Mission Conference. At that point of time it was looking that Ambedkar had come very close to embrace Sikhism. In September, 1938 Ambedkar sent few of his followers to Amritsar to study about the Sikh religion. Some of his followers decided to stay back in Punjab, later they converted to Sikhism. But due to some notable reasons Ambedkar abandoned his efforts of moving towards Sikhism. With this regard Harish k Pun highlights that Baba saheb Ambedkar had in 1936 seriously considered en masse conversion of the 'Depressed Classes' to Sikhism with a view to liberate them from the shackles of 'Manuvadi' caste system. It remains to be adequately probed how and why the project came to be dropped and never pursued thereafter.<sup>28</sup> With this regard Gail Ornvedt observes that one reason was undoubtedly his awareness of the existence of untouchability within Sikhism itself. Though in principle egalitarian, in fact Dalit Sikh retained a separate identity - as 'Marbhi Sikhs' or in some case 'Ravidasis' - and were differently treated. There was thus a kind of segregation with in Sikhism. At the social level, Dalit Sikh in Punjab remained landless, subordinate as agricultural laborers to the landed Jat Sikhs, the dominant community.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, Ambedkar must have observed that if Sikhism is being considered as the part of Hindu religion, then how it would disconnect itself from untouchability and caste

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<sup>28</sup> Puri, K Harish, (2003), Scheduled Caste and Sikh Community : A Historical Perspective, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 38, No. 26 (Jun. 28-Jul. 4), 2693

<sup>29</sup> Ornvedt, Gail, (2012), Ambedkar and Sikhism, Online available at, <https://seekingbegumpura.wordpress.com/2012/09/24/ambedkar-and-sikhism/>, Published on 24/9/2012

system. Social hierarchy and Caste system existed amongst the Sikh community too. So, after seeing the presence of caste system in Sikhism as it was present in Hinduism, Ambedkar thought that Dalits would remain as untouchables even if they convert into Sikh religion. Thereafter, Ambedkar became very careful about his decision to convert into Sikh religion and finally he decided not to adopt Sikhism.

According to Ambedkar, 'his Buddhism would be a sort of Neo-Buddhism or Navayana'.<sup>30</sup> He predicted that in the next 10-15 years India would become a Buddhist country. In this context Valerian Rodrigues analyses that 'though, Ambedkar significantly created a new Buddhism. Ambedkar developed a new interpretation of Buddhism which made commentators label it 'Ambedkar's Buddhism'. His magnum opus, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* highlights the central issues that concerned him throughout his life and demarcates his view sharply from that of his adversaries. The work contains the central teachings of the Buddha along with commentary built into it. The commentary transposes the Buddha's teachings to the present and suggests its contemporary relevance with respect to the problems that confront humanity. He saw Buddhism as an ideology that engages with the world, privileging the poor and exploited. Ambedkar repeatedly asserted that Buddha had a social message.'<sup>31</sup>

### **3.2 Conversion as Socio-Political Revolution**

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<sup>30</sup> Keer, (1971), 498

<sup>31</sup> Rodrigues, (2007), 25-26

*“Buddhism was a revolution, it was as great a Revolution as the French Revolution.” -Ambedkar*

Ambedkar wanted untouchables to get out from the fold of Hindu religion at any cost because the roots of untouchability and caste system were deeply inherited in Hinduism and that point of time it was not possible to bring reforms within Hindu religion. So, finally Ambedkar decided to denounce Hinduism and convert to Buddhism. After living thousands of years with humiliation the condition of untouchables were becoming worse than animals. Thus, being the saviour of untouchables it has become the responsibility of Ambedkar to take some radical steps for giving respectful life to the untouchables. For that purpose he found Buddhism the most suitable religion which would provide egalitarian life to untouchables. In this regard Valerian Rodrigues highlights that ‘Buddhism alone cherished such goals comprehensively and intimately and offered a close complementarity to freedom, equality and fraternity. Buddhism also embodied a just and emancipatory order, akin to be the moral basis of society.’<sup>32</sup> Buddhism emerged as an answer to the evils that existed in Hinduism. According to Ambedkar, Buddhism was the revolution against Brahmanism. Ambedkar not only revolutionized Buddhism but also rejected Hinduism with its basis of Vedas and Shastras and he subsequently burned out Manu Smriti as well.

Ambedkar categorically highlighted three major periods, which are mentioned above and further showed up the differences and conflicts between Hinduism and Buddhism.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 40

Where Hinduism firmly favored inequality, discrimination and it was oppressive in its nature, on other hand Buddhism advocated the idea of advanced egalitarian society and it was rational in its nature. (1) Brahmanism (the Vedic period, basically tribal in nature and characterized by varna among the Vedic Aryans, though this was not based on birth); (2) The 'Revolutionary' period of Buddhism, marked by the rise of the Magadha and Mauryan states and bringing about a great advance in the status of women and Shudras whose position had become degraded in the last stages of the Vedic period; and (3) the 'Counter Revolutionary' period of Hinduism marked by the Mann Smriti, the transformation of varna into caste, and the complete downgrading of shudras and women.<sup>33</sup> With this regard Valerian Rodrigues analyzes that 'Ambedkar argued that Buddhism, which attempted to form society on the basis of reason and morality, was a major revolution, both social and ideological, against the degeneration of the Aryan society. It condemned the Varna system and gave hope to the poor, the exploited and to women. It rallied against the sacrifices, priest craft and superstition. The Buddhist sangha became the platform for the movement towards empowering and enabling the common people. However Brahmanism struck back against the revolution through the counter-revolution launched by Pushyamitra'.<sup>34</sup> 'So it is very clear that decline of Buddhism as a result of the revival of Brahmanism under the Pushyamitra, with the help of Manu Smriti, which lead to the establishment of rigid caste system.

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<sup>33</sup> For a more detailed analysis please see, Chapter 11. The Triumph of Brahmanism in Moon, Vol.-3, (2014)

<sup>34</sup> Rodrigues, (2007), 24

Manu Smriti propounded a challenge against Buddhism and emerged as a dogma of counter revolution.

According to Ambedkar, 'the object of the regicide by Pushyamitra was to destroy Buddhism as a state religion and to make the Brahmins the sovereign rulers of India so that with the political power of the state behind it'<sup>35</sup> 'Another piece of evidence which shows that the origin and purpose of the revolution by Pushyamitra against the Mauryas was to destroy Buddhism and establish Brahmanism is evidenced by the promulgation of Manu Smriti as a code of laws.'<sup>36</sup> Pushyatra Brahmanic Revolution was undertaken for the purposes of restoring the ancient social system of Chaturvarna which under the Buddhist regime was put into the melting pot.'<sup>37</sup> Under the Mauryan and Magadha regime the condition of shudras and women were uplifted, Buddhism had brought a significant change in the life of both. Under these Buddhist regimes the shudras and women's became free person, could acquire property and enjoyed all equal rights. Buddhism was primarily responsible for bringing revolutionary changes and the elevation in the life of the shudras and women. But Pushyamitra Brahmanism took over Buddhism and again succeed to fortify its roots and brought back Chaturvarna system by demolishing the high status of shudras and women. Therefore, Ambedkar described this battle between Buddhism and Brahmanism as 'Revolution and Counter Revolution'.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Moon, Vol-3, (2104), 269

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 270

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 291

<sup>38</sup> For more detailed analysis please see part iii 'Revolution and Counter Revolution' in Moon, in Moon, Vol-3, (2014)

Ambedkar further stated that 'I like Buddhism' and further added that it is useful to the world in its present circumstances because it gives three principal in combination, which no other religion does. All other religions are bothering themselves with god and soul and life after death. Buddhism teaches, (1) prajna (understanding as against superstition and super nationalism), (2) it teaches karuna (love) and ( ) it teaches samata (equality). This is what man wants for a good and happy life on the earth. These three principles of Buddhism make it appealing to me.<sup>39</sup>

According to Ambedkar, Buddhism have all the necessary values to uplift the life of untouchables. Therefore, Ambedkar started to call it socio-political revolution and a revolution that would certainly eradicate untouchability and would establish the new-society based on equality, liberty and fraternity. In Ambedkar words, "Buddhism was a revolution. It was as great a Revolution as the French Revolution. Though it began as a Religious revolution, it became more than Religious revolution. It became a Social and Political Revolution."<sup>40</sup> In this regard Christophe Jaffrelot analyzed, 'Ambedkar legitimately highlights the egalitarian meaning of Buddhism, but he undoubtedly goes too far when deducing from it a message of social justice. The egalitarianism of the Buddha comes more from a religious and spiritual logic- above all it's the equality of human beings before God. But the fact that Buddhism was perceived by Ambedkar as an alternative to Hindu social hierarchy is clearly reflected in the

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<sup>39</sup> Sontakke, (2004), 245

<sup>40</sup> Moon, Vol-3, (2104), 153

practical details of his conversion.’<sup>41</sup> According to Ambedkar, ‘In contrast to religion, Dhamma was a secular ideology, understanding the world, man and society, transforming them in the light of reason and on the basis of morality. In his reinterpretation of Buddhism, Ambedkar emphasized a social, egalitarian dimension which may be present in its teaching.’<sup>42</sup> Basically Ambedkar was in favour of evolving a new society or a new social order in India, which was to be based on equality, liberty and fraternity or democracy, as stated earlier. For him, the principals of equality, liberty, fraternity were completely rooted in the Buddhism or in the thoughts and philosophy of the Buddha.

Ambedkar rejected Hinduism as the caste system was co-substantial to religion and upper caste people were reluctant to give away their exclusive rights, whereas equality was inherent in Buddhism.<sup>43</sup> Ambedkar was the great admirer of French revolution, thus he compared Buddhism with French revolution. He firmly believed that Buddhism flourished the same idea as did the French revolution. French revolution established the notion of equality, liberty and fraternity. Ambedkar also wanted to bring his people at level of other Indians or non-untouchables in all the terms whether economically, politically and socially; therefore he moved towards Buddhism and called it socio-political revolution. To Ambedkar Buddhism certainly offered best possible choice because it was an egalitarian religion. By adopting Buddhism he not only revived Buddhism, but also

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<sup>41</sup> Jaffrelot, Christophe, (2005), *Analyzing and Fighting Caste: Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 133

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

<sup>43</sup> Moon, Vol-3, (2014), 153



interpreted it as the most rational and scientific religion in the world. Undoubtedly, Ambedkar was much inspired by both French revolution and Buddhism and impacts of these two can be clearly seen in his philosophy of an egalitarian society that also highly reflected in the Indian Constitution particularly in the preamble, fundamental rights and duties.

Certainly Buddhism helped to eradicate caste system and further it did not accept any socio-religious hierarchy. It always gave preference to equality and within the fold of Buddhism untouchables and women's could achieve equal status with others, which was not possible in Hinduism. According to Ambedkar, "Equality is the main feature of Buddhism. The religion of the Buddha gives freedom of thought and freedom of self-development to all. To abjure violence is another essential teaching of Buddhism. It has never taught to achieve salvation by sacrificing animals or any living being to propitiate God. I would say that the rise of Buddhism in India was as significant as the French Revolution. Prior to the advent of Buddhism, it was impossible to even think that a Shudra would get throne. History of India reveals that after the emergence of Buddhism. Shudras are seen getting thrones. Verily Buddhism paved way for establishment of democracy and socialistic pattern of society in India."<sup>44</sup> In Indian history, period of Buddhism particularly Magadha and Mauryan Empire brought up equality, freedom, greatness and many other significant changes in the lives of untouchables. In these periods Chaturvarna was completely annihilated and untouchables could become rulers of the

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<sup>44</sup> Sontakke, (2004), 228-229

country. Thus, in that sense, according to Ambedkar, Buddhism was a socio-political revolution.

### **3.3 Conversion as Emancipation**

*"Conversion is the only right path of freedom which ultimately leads to equality". - Ambedkar*

Having fought along battle against Hinduism for many years. Ambedkar thought his struggle should not be go in vain therefore he decided to leave the religion of his birth and assumed that life of untouchables can be emancipated only through conversion. By denouncing Hinduism untouchables would not only emancipate from Hindu religion but also from its other diseases, for instance rigid caste system, discriminatory Hindu laws, Hindu religious scriptures, etc. It was Ambedkar's firm believe that within the fold of Hinduism there was no possibility that status of untouchables would ever be uplifted. While addressing a gathering at Dadar on 31 May, 1936 Ambedkar said, 'the principal object of our movement is onl' to achieve social freedom for untouchables; it is equally true that this freedom cannot be secured without conversion.'<sup>45</sup> Thus, for Ambedkar and his followers conversion had become inevitable way to emancipation. The main purpose of conversion was to achieve social and economic freedom for untouchables.

Many of Ambedkar's initiatives are considered as the methods of emancipation for untouchables, which would have successfully persuaded by him during his battle against Hinduism. For instance, the burning of the Manu Smriti by the

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<sup>45</sup> Ambedkar, B.R., (2007), *Conversion as Emancipation*, New Delhi: Critical Quest, 24

Untouchables under the presence of Ambedkar at Mahad in 1927 was the first major event which has very major significance and importance in the history of the emancipation of the Untouchables. According to Ambedkar, there cannot be a more degrading system of social caste organization than chaturvarna. On the other hand 'Buddhism has no place for the caste system and Chaturvarna.'<sup>46</sup> For assaulting Hinduism and for liberation and emancipation for untouchables, Ambedkar established many socio-political organizations and also persuaded various strategies, one of the leading strategy among them for the emancipation of untouchables was undoubtedly conversion, Ambedkar once said that "In Hinduism there is no hope for the Untouchables. But this is not the only reason why the Untouchables wish to quit Hinduism. There is another reason which makes it imperative for them to quit Hinduism. Untouchability is a part of Hinduism."<sup>47</sup> Further Ambedkar argued, when he was addressing a gathering at Dadar on May 31, 1936, that the Hindu religion has no sympathy, no equality and no freedom for the untouchables and he further said that 'if you remain within the fold of Hinduism, you cannot attain a status than that of a slave'. By all his hard (words, speeches and writings) Ambedkar was making efforts to convince his followers to convert to Buddhism, because the Buddhist Sangh is like an ocean, in this Sangh all are equal. It is not like Hinduism where only few people enjoy all rights and benefits and others have to remain with only option to survive with pathetic life. According to Ambedkar, the great conversion would constitute a new chapter

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<sup>46</sup> Keer, (2005), 492

<sup>47</sup> Moon, Vol-5, (2014), 442

in the life of untouchables and undoubtedly it will bring equality and happiness.

According to Ambedkar, 'the matter of conversion should be viewed through two aspects - social and religious or moral and spiritual'<sup>48</sup> But he also added, whatever may be the aspect or thinking about the 'conversion', it is important to understand the nature of untouchability. The problem of untouchability is a class struggle between Hindus and Dalits. In case of Dalits, their struggle began as soon as they started claiming equal treatment. This struggle is permanent and has no end.'<sup>49</sup> That means whenever untouchables try to achieve equal rights, immediately they have to face counter agitation from the side of upper caste Hindus. Untouchability and caste system had become permanent features of Hinduism. Therefore without denouncing Hindu religion there was no possibility to destroy rigid caste system; otherwise untouchables shall always remain with lower status.

Ambedkar analyzed that if untouchables really want to get emancipation from Hindu religion then only they will have to fight against it for saving their life from its disease, in this cause none would come to help out. Thus, Ambedkar said, 'you yourself have to rise; none else will come to your aid.'<sup>50</sup> In this regard Valerian Rodrigues analyzes that, "Emancipation of Untouchables had to be fought for by the Untouchables themselves, that the movement of the Untouchables was an integral part of the universal movement for freedom, equality and

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<sup>48</sup> Ambedkar, (2007), 8

<sup>49</sup> Massey, (2003), 28

<sup>50</sup> Ambedkar, (2007), 26

belonging to society as a whole.”<sup>51</sup> Ambedkar further asserted that, To become human, convert yourselves. To get organized, convert yourselves. To achieve strength, convert yourselves. To secure equality, convert yourselves. To get liberty, convert yourselves. To make your domestic life happy, convert yourselves.<sup>52</sup> It is very clear that for Ambedkar Conversion was not a path of escapism and cowardice but it was the path of Enlightenment, it was the path towards equal society, it was the path of new beginning, it was path of coming out from dark ages and certainly it was the path of wisdom. Ultimately, the ‘Great Conversion’ reached its final destination on 14 October 1956. While converting to Buddhism Ambedkar remarked, “I am overjoyed, I am exalted. I feel I have been liberated from the hell.”<sup>53</sup> He further vowed that, By discarding my ancient religion which stood for inequality and oppression today I am reborn. I have no faith in the philosophy of incarnation and it is wrong and mischievous to say that Buddha was an incarnation of Vishnu. I am no more a devotee of any Hindu God or goddess. I will not perform shraddh. I will strictly follow the eightfold path of Buddha. I will lead a life guided by the three principles of knowledge, right path and compassion.<sup>54</sup> Besides these, many of other Ambedkar’s conversion oaths also launched direct attacks on Hinduism. For instance; “I shall have no faith in Brabma, Vishnu and Mahesh nor shall I worship them, I shall not allow any ceremonies to be performed by Brahmins, I renounce Hinduism which is harmful for humanity and impedes the

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<sup>51</sup> Rodrigues, (2007), 6

<sup>52</sup> Sontakke, (2004), 243

<sup>53</sup> Moon, Vol. – 17(i), (2014), xx,

<sup>54</sup> Keer, (1971), 500

advancement and development of humanity because it is based on inequality, and adopt Buddhism as my religion.”<sup>55</sup>

During conversion speech Ambedkar dealt with a number of questions. He told his followers that caste system was actually part and parcel of Hinduism. Thus destroying caste system meant destroying the Hindu religion. Ambedkar also argued that economic or political rights of the dalit will not be affected by the conversion. Gail Omvedt concludes that ‘with the conversion to Buddhism Ambedkar achieved what Phule and Periyar for all their resistance to Hinduism had failed to achieve: making a conscious non-Hindu identity a collective material and radicalizing force in India.’<sup>56</sup> In the last phase of Ambedkar’s life, he made a great resolution to raise the banner of Buddhism and bring it back to his motherland. Ambedkar not only adopted Buddhism with his followers but also ended its exile for over twelve hundred years. According to Ambedkar, emancipation of untouchables can be achieved only by converting in Buddhism because the teachings of Buddha is based on the foundations of liberty, equality, fraternity, and it also favors scientific and rational humanistic outlook.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Ambedkar’s battle for securing fundamental rights for weaker sections in particular and for all the citizens in general, is unparalleled. He is considered the chief architect of the

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<sup>55</sup> Ambedkar 22 Conversion Oaths, For more details please see online: <http://www.ambedkar.org/impdocs/22Vows.htm>

<sup>56</sup> Gail, Omvedt, (2000), Undoing the Bondage: Dr. Ambedkar's Theory of Dalit Liberation, in Yadav K.C. (ed.,) From Periphery to Centre Stage: Ambedkar, Ambedkarism and Dalit Future, New Delhi: Manohar, 136

Constitution of India, which is the powerful instrument of the social change if implemented in the right spirit. The Constitution is a muchadmired contribution of Ambedkar's social and philosophical understanding towards nation. Since independence a considerable amount of change has occurred among all sections of the population in India just only because for the constitution. Without his guidance, leadership and articulation, the story of liberation of downtrodden people in India particularly that of untouchables and women, would have been different. Ambedkar not only gave a constitution to this nation but also formed a barricade against upsetting and anarchical forces.

Being a survivor of untouchables Ambedkar led the fight against caste based discrimination; his published or unpublished writings also reveal his firm criticism against Hinduism and its disease. Ambedkar pointed out that how religious scriptures of Hindu religion particularly the Manu Smriti has categorically advocated the idea of Varna system, which largely persuade inequality and discrimination. Ambedkar's efforts throughout his life for the betterment of untouchables and women are highly appreciable. He has seen some commonality in the plight of untouchables and women; for him both were the victims of the Mann Smriti and Hindu religion. He further measured Hinduism and its affiliated diseases as a great enemy of Humanism. At that point of time all the running circumstances provoked Ambedkar and his followers to denounce Hindu religion and convert to some other religion. And certainly for Ambedkar, Buddhism was the religion

of humanity, where untouchables will be treated equally like other human beings and they will receive equal rights too. So, in the last phase of his life, Ambedkar made a great resolve to raise the banner of Buddhism. Finally, Ambedkar decided to bring back Buddha to his motherland, which had experienced a long exile.

But unfortunately, change of religion has not made slightest difference to the social and economic position of the untouchables. Nearly about sixty years have been passed since many of the former Untouchables converted themselves into Buddhism but the caste based societal conflicts and discrimination towards them is still continuing and atrocities have not yet stopped. The former untouchables comprise nearly around 17% population of today's India, who are historically known by different names such as backwards, dalits, depressed and oppressed class, etc. Before independence the British colonial government under 'Govt. of India Act 1935' and after attaining independence, the government of India, combined all the untouchable caste into one single identity and gave them a separate status as 'Schedule Caste' and for giving them equal opportunity and resources made many safeguards under the constitution. In spite of having all constitutional guarantees and safeguards social apartheid and exclusion, caste based violence and discrimination, atrocities, deprivation, untouchability, denying the access to resources and basic facilities to former untouchables are very common today. Conflict between the backward and forward castes in today's India can be seen easily. Even after near about seventy years to attaining freedom and



becoming a democratic modern nation the caste based prejudice and injustice towards former untouchables are still continuing. Caste based untouchability and discrimination as a problem still persist in today's India either in old form, in traditional form or in a new modified form. Only fewer lives among them have been uplifted but majority of schedule caste population still bound to live vulnerable life. In this respect, Gail Omvedt observes "In spite of all social and legal measures adopted by the Indian government to protect the former untouchables, known as the Scheduled Caste, they remain among most deprived, and are still the victims of segregation. They do not have access to education, productive capital, land, or work. They are exploited in more ways than one, for instance, as bounded laborers."<sup>57</sup> Only very less people belonging to the scheduled caste community have availed some facilities due to reservation policy and enjoyed better social status in cities than in villages, but majority of the population of these communities still are most exploited and economically backward. Ambedkar's vision for egalitarian society cannot be fulfilled without establishing social democracy before political democracy. In this respect, as Ambedkar asserted during his last speech in constituent assembly, "We must make our political democracy a social democracy as well. Political democracy cannot last unless it lies at the base of social democracy. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life."<sup>58</sup> That day will be a very fortunate duty when Ambedkar's vision for socio-economic upliftment and

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<sup>57</sup> Omvedt, (2004), 48

<sup>58</sup> Moon, Vol-13, (2014), 1216

development for every citizen of this country particularly for downtrodden people, will be achieved. Ambedkar's lifelong sacrifices and cause for establishing the society on the fundamental principles of equality, liberty and fraternity will not go in vain. One day this dream of Ambedkar will definitely become a reality.

## **5. Summary**

- A. Ambedkar belonged to Mahar caste, which was considered untouchable; he suffered from socio-economic discrimination throughout his life. In spite of this he could succeed to secure good education. After completing education from abroad he returned to India and launched the movement for untouchable's liberation.
- B. Caste discrimination provoked and inspired him to uplift the pitiable condition of the untouchables in the society. Thus, with the help of the Maharaja of Kothapur, he founded a weekly journal, 'Mooknayak', which criticized the orthodox beliefs of Hindus and the reluctance of politicians to fight against the discrimination.
- C. 1927, he actively worked against untouchability. Instead of following the route of violence, he walked on the footsteps of Gandhi and led a Satyagraha movement, fighting for the rights of untouchables to access the water source and temple entry.
- D. After 1930, being as a crusader of the rights of the untouchables, Ambedkar was seriously contemplating about denouncing Hinduism. Therefore, besides his other

activities conversion into Buddhism too had become main agenda of his combat against Hinduism.

- E. On October 14, 1956 Ambedkar organized a public ceremony to convert around laths of his supporters to Buddhism. In his conversion speech, Ambedkar thoroughly criticized Hindu religion and caste based division. Ambedkar decided to write a book on Buddhism. The Buddha and his Dhamma was first published in 1957 after Ambedkar's death.
- F. In the last stage of his life Ambedkar was suffering from serious health problems. On 6 December, 1956 he died at his home in Delhi. A Buddhist style cremation was organized for him. The cremation ceremony was attended by thousands of his supporters, activists and admirers.

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