

Title Of The Paper Reasons For Delay In Ambedkar's Plan To Conversion

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Citation: Mahender Singh Dhakad (2022), Title of the Paper Reasons For delay in Ambedkar's plan to Conversion ,Educational Administration: Theory and Practice, 28(3), 374 -378, Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v28i03.7366

Introduction.

During his early years, Ambedkar gained recognition for spearheading the temple entry movement in Nasik, Pune, and Mumbai. However, his movement strategy underwent a sudden shift following the Poona Pact. According to Rodrigues, by 1935, Ambedkar had relinquished his efforts to reform Hinduism. Despite some attempts to embrace Sikhism, Ambedkar postponed the matter of conversion for the subsequent two decades, having failed to realize his initial plan.¹

His later writings imply that he did not forget the issue and was immersed in the deep study of Hinduism and the comparative study of religions of the world for two decades. Following the Poona Pact, Gandhi inaugurated a newspaper titled 'Harijan' on February 11, 1933, aimed at addressing the welfare concerns of the Untouchables. However, Ambedkar abstained from conveying a message on this occasion, asserting his belief that the outcast status was an inherent product of the caste system. He contended that as long as castes persisted, so would the existence of outcasts. Ambedkar emphasized that the only effective measure to emancipate the marginalized was the complete dismantling of the caste structure.²

The Delay in Conversion

Eleanor Zelliot posited that the twenty-year gap between Ambedkar's announcement of his conversion in 1935 and his actual conversion stemmed from his inability to identify solutions that aligned with both his political convictions and intellectual principles. Consequently, he opted to prioritize constitutional reforms over initiating a religious movement among the Untouchables. Between 1937 and 1939, he held an elected position in the Bombay Legislative Assembly. Subsequently, from 1942 to 1946, he served as a Labor Member in the Viceroy's Executive Council. From 1946 to 1951, his primary focus was safeguarding political rights in the Constituent Assembly and as a member of Nehru's first cabinet minister.³

On the contrary, the Bhagwan Das posits that there were other reasons for postponing the matter of conversion. Although Ambedkar did not disclose these reasons to the Untouchables or to members of other communities, they were of significant importance to him and largely contributed to the indefinite deferral of the decision. Ambedkar was acutely aware of the strengths and weaknesses of his community, the majority of whom were illiterate and ignorant. He lacked the financial resources and infrastructure necessary to facilitate a large-scale conversion program involving millions of people. In addition to that, he recognized that the decision could have had adverse implications for the upcoming February 1937 elections. Another significant concern was the potential for violence against the Untouchables in the event of mass conversion. Such violent acts could have resulted in the loss of innocent lives in both rural and urban areas. During the separate interview with the editor of a Jewish publication, Ambedkar expressed his apprehensions. Hartman, the editor of Zion's Herald, questioned whether the Untouchables possessed the resolve to make a decisive and courageous choice? Without challenging the Hindus, the prospects for the emancipation of the Untouchables were minimal. He observed that if the Untouchables were to convert to Islam, they would face severe repression from the Hindus. Conversely, if they embraced Christianity, they would encounter opposition from both Hindus and Muslims. At the end of the interview, Ambedkar agreed with the editor, saying that "Exactly", therefore, they were not yet prepared for conversion.⁴

Struggle for Political Representation

It is important to note that Ambedkar was not a theologian and did not practice any particular religion in order to attain salvation. Since the beginning of his career, he insisted on political representation for the Untouchable community. Primarily he was a politician, but later he reached the conclusion that religion and

politics were equally crucial for social progress. In May 1924, he informed his followers that if the country achieved independence, the Depressed Classes would receive the same voting rights as other citizens.⁵

After the Poona Pact, Ambedkar mobilised the Depressed Classes towards political representation and urged them to concentrate on political power instead of investing their resources and energy in spiritual happiness. On 28th September 1932, he told his community that the object of the temple entry movement might be useful, but they should care for their material goods instead of their spiritual food.⁶ Similarly, on 9th October 1932, he advised his community in Mumbai that people should not neglect the material needs of life and not be indifferent to the knowledge that enabled them. Ultimately, he appealed to the Depressed Classes that they should utilise the political power that was about to come into their hands.⁷ The same month he told his people that the bread and butter problem could not be solved by pilgrimage.⁸

Despite his announcement to leave Hinduism, Ambedkar's primary goal was to gain political representation through the electoral process. Therefore, he urged his followers not to switch religions hastily. During the Maharashtra Untouchable Youth Conference held on January 11th and 12th, 1936, in Pune, he expressed to his people that the Depressed Classes should not be under the misconception that conversion would solve all of their problems and suddenly put them on an equal footing with others. He clarified that under any new religion, whether Christianity, Islam or Sikhism, they might still need to fight for their social rights and organise struggles to attain liberty and equality. It is illogical to assume that converting to Islam or Christianity would automatically make someone a Nawab or Pope.⁹

In 1937, India was granted provincial autonomy under the Government of India Act of 1935. As the forthcoming elections began, each political party initiated its propaganda and campaign. Ambedkar chalked out an election plan after deliberation with his supporters to fulfil his dream. Taking into account the needs of workers, peasants, landless laborers, and impoverished tenants, Ambedkar decided to form the political party known as Independent Labour Party in August 1936.¹⁰ On 17th February 1937, the elections took place, and Ambedkar won by a large margin. Under the provision of the new constitution, elections proved to be successful for Ambedkar's Independent Labour Party. Of the seventeen candidates the party put up, fifteen were successful.¹¹

In 1945, following the release of Congress leaders from jail, a conference was convened in Simla. Despite his position as a Member of the Executive Council, Ambedkar was unable to participate. Nonetheless, he staunchly advocated for the allocation of three seats in the Central Executive Council, proportionate to their population. In July 1945, general elections were held in Britain, resulting in the ascent of the Labour Party to power.¹²

Subsequently, provincial elections were held in March 1946 to establish a constituent assembly in India. However, the Scheduled Caste Federation suffered a resounding defeat, with the Congress emerging as the dominant force. The defeat of the Scheduled Caste Federation in these elections proved detrimental to Ambedkar, significantly tarnishing his political stature as a leader of the Depressed Classes.¹³

Towards Buddhism

Trevor Ling contends that Buddhism garnered interest from the West in the modern era for several reasons. Firstly, it is grounded in reason, appealing to the intellect. Secondly, it resonates with the emotional aspect of individuals, touching the heart. Thirdly, Buddhism emphasizes self-reliance, advocating for personal empowerment. Moreover, it is compatible with various disciplines such as science, philosophy, psychology, and ethics. Buddhism posits that individuals are solely responsible for their present circumstances and the architects of their own destiny.¹⁴ Morality is the essential foundation of Buddhist life for laypeople as well as for monks.¹⁵

Prior to Ambedkar's final conversion, the majority of Buddhists in India were concentrated in the Hill States spanning from Northeast to Northwest India, as well as in regions bordering Sri Lanka, Tibet, Nepal, and Burma. In 1951, the Buddhist population in India was recorded at 141,426. Despite the existence of the Maha Bodhi Society, which operated branches in several cities and published the English journal 'Mahabodhi' from Calcutta, the adoption of Buddhism as a religious affiliation remained limited. Contrarily, the Buddhist population witnessed a decline from 232,003 in 1941 to 141,426 within a decade.¹⁶

In 1932, during his time as a member of the Franchise Committee on tour in Madras, Ambedkar highlighted Lord Buddha's contribution for the first time. Addressing the Conference of the Depressed Classes, he said that Gautam Buddha and Ramanuja were touchable leaders who had strived to improve the conditions of the Untouchables and worked for their emancipation.¹⁷ It was rumoured in 1933 that Ambedkar was considering converting to Islam, but he adamantly denied it and instead expressed the possibility of converting to Buddhism.¹⁸

In addition to this, numerous examples in Ambedkar's writings indicate his inclination towards Buddhism. In 1933, he built his residence in Bombay and named it Rajagriha, after the location where Lord Buddha began his teachings. In 1945, he founded Siddhartha College in Bombay, naming it after Lord Buddha's birth name. In 1950, he established his second college in Aurangabad and named it Milinda, after the renowned Buddhist king. His speeches during these years consistently reflected his leaning towards Buddhism.¹⁹

On 14th January 1955, he disclosed to his followers that his attachment to Buddhism was not new and that he had been interested in Buddhism since his childhood. Upon passing the matriculation examination, he received a small biography of Buddha from Dada Keluskar. He discerned a profound distinction between the teachings of Buddha and the doctrines of other religious texts.²⁰

In March 1948, Ambedkar started writing the preface to 'The Essence of Buddhism', a book written by P. Lakshmi Narasu. He acknowledged that he never met this author and knew little about his life. He gathered information about the author from Pattabhi Sitaramaiyya, who had a personal acquaintance and friendship with him. Professor P. Lakshmi Narasu held a significant place in Ambedkar's esteem. Ambedkar regarded Narasu as a social reformer dedicated to combating the social injustices inherent in the caste system. Narasu was also a fervent admirer of Buddhism, frequently delivering lectures on the subject.²¹

In addition, Ambedkar has attested to recommending Narasu's book, 'The Essence of Buddhism,' to numerous friends who sought his advice on quality literature about Buddhism. In the preface of Narasu's book, Ambedkar implied that he was writing a book on Buddhism at the time.²²

In his address on Parinirvana Day in May 1950, Ambedkar emphasized that religion should not be inherited like property. Instead, he argued that every individual should contemplate religious beliefs to rational examination before accepting them. He subsequently declared the onset of a Buddhist Renaissance in India. He substantiated this assertion by highlighting developments such as the adoption of Buddhist symbols like the Ashok Chakra and the emblem of three lions by the President of India.²³

In his address to his followers in September 1950, he unequivocally declared his commitment to dedicating his life to the revival of Buddhism. He refuted the notion that political freedom alone would resolve all of the country's issues. Instead, he appealed to the masses to wholeheartedly embrace Buddhism in significant numbers.²⁴ Speaking at the Buddha temple in Mumbai in November 1950, Ambedkar repeated his commitment to devote the rest of his life to the revival and spread of Buddhism.²⁵ He again affirmed in January 1951 in Mumbai that he would revive Buddhism in India, but in his view, adopting Buddhism would not be an easy task. Therefore, he was framing some rules and regulations, and only those who carefully followed these rules would be given the Diksha (ordain). He disclosed that he had been studying all the religions of the world for the past 20 years.²⁶

In February 1951, Ambedkar published an article titled 'The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Women' in a Calcutta-based journal called Maha Bodhi. This article was a response to another article published in the Weekly magazine, in which the writer accused Buddha of contributing to the marginalisation of women in Indian society. Ambedkar outrightly refuted the charges made in the article. According to Ambedkar, the passage used as evidence for the charges made by the writer was added later by Bhikkus, who were Brahmins. Buddha was not against women or expressed any contemptuous remarks toward them. Before the Buddhist movement, women were denied the right to acquire knowledge which was the birthright of every human being, and they were denied the right to realise their spiritual potential. After some time, Buddha allowed the admission of women into the Sangha, where they were given the right to acquire education and could realise their spiritual potential along with men.²⁷

During the celebration of the 2500th Buddha Jayanti in Mumbai on May 24, 1956, Ambedkar announced his intention to convert to Buddhism in October of that year. In his address, he issued a scathing critique of V.D. Savarkar, who had written a series of articles on the Buddha's teachings of non-violence. Ambedkar asserted that only those actively involved in the emancipation of the Untouchables possessed the authority to critique them. He urged his adversary to refrain from interference and allow him and his people the freedom to navigate their own path, even if it meant encountering pitfalls. Ambedkar further likened himself to Moses, who led his people from Egypt to Palestine, the promised land of liberation. He concluded his speech by announcing the imminent publication of his book on Buddhism.²⁸

In 1950, Ambedkar traveled to Ceylon to attend the Conference of the World Buddhist Fellowship, held from May 25 to June 6. Delegates from 26 countries gathered to discuss the promotion of fellowship among Buddhist nations. As a vigilant observer, Ambedkar addressed the meeting, emphasizing that the time had come to initiate efforts for the revival of Buddhism in India. In Ceylon, his purpose was to understand the ceremonial part of Buddhism.²⁹ While addressing the delegates of the Conference, Ambedkar mentioned that although Buddhism had disappeared from India in the material form, its presence was still there as a spiritual force.³⁰

In December 1954, Ambedkar journeyed to Rangoon to participate in the Third Buddhist World Conference, notwithstanding his declining health. Despite his physical condition, he delivered an address at the conference, elucidating strategies for the revival of Buddhism in India. He emphasized that countries like Ceylon and Burma were at the forefront of the Buddhist movement.³¹

He meticulously prepared his speech in the form of a memorandum, which he presented to the Sasana Council of Buddhists of Burma in two parts: the first part addressed the program for propagating Buddhism in India, while the second part focused on the conditions of Buddhists in South India. In the initial segment, he discussed his ongoing work on the Buddhist Gospel titled 'The Buddha and his Dhamma,' along with outlining a ceremony for the conversion to Buddhism.³² Ambedkar was disheartened by the superstitious

practices observed among the Sri Lankan people, such as washing the feet of monks. In contrast, during his time in Burma, he found inspiration in observing monks actively involved in the reconstruction of villages.³³ Despite consistently expressing his commitment to the revival of Buddhism, Ambedkar's intentions became evident in 1954 when he acquired an image of Buddha from Rangoon for installation at the Buddha Bihara in Dehu Road near Poona. During the ceremony, attended by a crowd of twenty thousand, he announced his work on a book about Buddhism. The aim of this book was to elucidate its principles to the general public in a clear and accessible manner.³⁴

Ambedkar's final journey took him to Kathmandu, Nepal, where he was invited to deliver a lecture at the Fourth World Buddhist Conference on November 15, 1956. Addressing the conference, Ambedkar emphasized that Buddhism, in essence, differs from all other religions worldwide, as its doctrines primarily pertain to social aspects. On November 20, he was requested to speak on 'Ahimsa in Buddhism,' although many delegates anticipated insights into 'Buddha and Karl Marx.' Despite this, upon accepting the request, he expressed apprehension regarding the future of Buddhist youths influenced by Marxist ideology. Ambedkar believed that Marx alone was not the sole liberator worthy of reverence. Ambedkar suggested a parallel between the intentions of Buddha and Karl Marx. According to Marx, private property serves as the principal cause of human exploitation and enslavement, leading to sorrow and suffering. Similarly, Buddha sought to eradicate Dukk.³⁵

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