



Religion, Conversion and Dalits: Developing an Ambedkarite Perspective

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Abstract

This paper analyses the issues Ambedkar considered before adopting Buddhism. These issues would serve as a guiding force for Dalit's in helping them understand the question of religion and determine their religious identity. This deliberation, therefore, assumes significance because religion has an overarching influence on almost all Indians and especially Hindus. So an emancipatory project has to find anchorage in an emancipatory religion. The question of religion holds significance for Dalit's as to what choice they are making with regard to their religious identity. And it is here Ambedkar and his ideas will be of great help to Dalit's in their quest for emancipated life. Ambedkar's ideas have also influenced some conversion movements by Dalit's in recent time. This, therefore, gives more credence to understanding Ambedkarism, especially with regard to his religious ideas, which have the potential to engender social transformation in the contemporary period. The effort here is to delve deeper into such a complex issue so as to develop an Ambedkarite perspective.

Keywords: Emancipatory Religion, Religious Identity, Conversion, Buddhism, Dalit

INTRODUCTION

Indian society and, more particularly, the Hindu society is a caste-based society, and caste is known to have originated several centuries ago. Known for its tenacity and resilience, no wonder, the caste system continues to have its overarching influence even today. In the form of the caste system, the Hindu society has an in-built hierarchical arrangement and is responsible for engendering an excluded category called Dalit's. Dalit or ex-untouchables of India have suffered from multiple ignominies, indignities and inhumanities since centuries. They continue to experience the same even today. This category veritably epitomizes exclusion and discrimination, as Dalit's have been subjected to all-encompassing exclusionary and discriminatory practices that have deprived them of a humane life. They are born as human beings, but denied of a humane living—a living with respect and dignity. People can live with respect and dignity, when they are not only entitled to, but also ensured of, certain basic and indispensable rights. But, it is not shrouded in mystery that Dalit's have been rendered right less by the Hindu society. Right less as they are, this has made them vulnerable to cumulative deprivation, discrimination and exploitation. The justification for such an imposed oppression and in-built inequality comes from Hindu religion. Therefore, historically seen, Dalit's have always protested and resisted against Hinduism and its oppressive features, responsible for their domination and oppression. The form of protests and resistances, however, differed, but they underlined one very seminal thing and, that is, the in egalitarianism of Hinduism—its integral part—had led to comprehensive exploitation of Dalit's, which resulted in such protests in different parts of the country at different times. Whether the SNDP Movement in Kerala led by Shri Narayan Guru, the Self-Respect Movement in Tamil Nadu led by E.V. Ramasamy Periyar, the Conversion and Dalit Movement in Maharashtra led by B. R. Ambedkar, the Satyasodhak Movement in Maharashtra led by Jotirao Phule, or myriad other movements that appeared much before twentieth century—all of them revolted against the iniquitous Hindu social system and untouchability-based inhumanities and injustices. An attempt will be made in this paper to comprehend the issue of religion as understood by Ambedkar vis-à-vis Buddhism and the issue of conversion, an available option, in the context of a face-off between Hinduism and Dalit's. The effort will also be made to grasp the religious identity of today's Dalit's.



METHODS AND DATA

This paper uses both primary and secondary sources. The primary data used in this paper are collected during 2001–2005 as a part of my PhD work from 100 university students having qualifications of post-graduation (PG) and above. The universe of the study comprises Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University (DR. BAMU), Aurangabad. An open-ended questionnaire method was used (personally distributed and collected) and snowball technique (one leading to the other) was followed, as it was difficult to get a list of Dalit students. The issues of religion, religious identity and conversion may have been taken up earlier in some way or the other by some scholars, one of them being Neera Burra (1996), though the focus of her study was slightly different. Even Fitzgerald (2007) dealt with these issues in some way. However, the present paper will grapple with these issues both theoretically and empirically. The other important aspect is that educated Dalit's (students) comprise the sample and this makes this investigation different.

UNDERSTANDING RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

It is the religion that provides the life force to the caste system and its associated accomplice-untouchability. Ambedkar's vitriolic attack on Hinduism should thus be seen in such a context. He was not an atheist; he was a Hindu by birth, but he was not oblivious to the ills of Hinduism. He had a rational and dissecting bent of mind. Hinduism for him was a majoritarian religion, which was simply a Brahminic tool for exploitation of Dalit's. They were considered to be Hindus, but did not have any right as a Hindu. In other words, they were Hindus sans rights. Religion should be, in his opinion, emancipatory and should have a social philosophy. This takes us to the question: what is an emancipatory religion?

RELIGION AS EMANCIPATION

Ambedkar had a very clear idea about what an emancipatory religion was. With modern education and scores of degrees to his credit, he knew that religious values preaching in egalitarianism could never become the basis of a modern society and could never become an emancipatory religion. A modern society has to have cardinal faith in egalitarianism. Drawing a distinction between 'the religion of rules' (by which he meant essentially caste hierarchy) and 'the religion of principles' (by which he meant essentially democratic egalitarianism, though not the extreme individualism of the West) (Fitzgerald, 2007, p.132), Ambedkar espoused for a true religion, which, according to him, was nothing but religion of principles. Thus, the basis of a true religion, in his opinion, should be in consonance with liberty, equality and fraternity, in short with democracy. In other words, a true religion is what an emancipator religion is all about.

IS HINDUISM AN EMANCIPATORY RELIGION?

Hinduism has an in-built graded inequality through caste system, and it provides religious justification to the practice of pollution and purity, reflected through one of the most despicable forms of exclusion-untouchability. For Ambedkar, caste is the central fact of Hinduism and untouchability is a

defining characteristic of caste (Fitzgerald, 2007, p.134). Whatever problems Dalit's suffer from have been gifted to them by Hinduism through caste system and the practice of untouchability. So Hinduism is not based on the cardinal values of liberty, equality and fraternity, which are the founding/ guiding principles of democracy. Hinduism, therefore, cannot be an emancipatory religion with caste system and its ideology of purity-impurity being an integral part of it.

FORM OF PROTEST AGAINST THE IN EGALITARIAN HINDUISM

As a form of protest against the inegalitarian character of Hinduism, Ambedkar left it and adopted Buddhism. He refused to be called a Hindu. This was because Ambedkar became disillusioned with Hinduism. He saw no sign of Hinduism purging itself of caste and its associate—untouchability. So he wanted to free himself from such a religion, but, as a religious person like most Indians are, he looked for an alternative religion. It was also not a personal question because people were looking up to him as their leader. So his action and words did have their significance. He wanted to adopt a religion, which would provide relief from social and mental agony of caste discrimination and untouchability, and which would enable Dalit's to lead a life of dignity and self-respect. As early as 1935, Ambedkar made it clear that though he was born a Hindu, but he would certainly not die a Hindu. In the conversion speech of 1935, he said, "... I had the misfortune of being born with the stigma of an untouchable. However, it is not my fault; but I will not die a Hindu, for this is in my power" (Zelliot, 1992, p. 2006). Also, in his "Annihilation of Caste," he made his intention clear for a change of religion. He said, "... you must make your efforts to uproot caste, if not in my way, then in your way. I am sorry, I will not be with you. I have decided to change" (Ambedkar, 1979, p. 80). But Ambedkar did not specify to which religion he would change, giving rise to much speculation. Though Islam, Christianity, Sikhism and Buddhism were the alternative religions to consider for conversion, Islam and Christianity were never considered very seriously at any stage because of their foreign origin. The other important factor was that the Indian caste system did not even spare them from infection. Even Sikhism was affected by it. According to Ambedkar, "Caste is no doubt primarily the breath of the Hindus. But the Hindus have fouled the air all over and everybody is infected, Sikh, Muslim and Christian" (Ambedkar, 1979, p. 80). However, Buddhism was free from caste infection, and, hence, he embraced it. It was probably, as M.S. Gore puts it, on 29th September 1950, in a speech at the Buddhist temple in Worli that Ambedkar made the first open plea to his people to embrace Buddhism as a way out of their sufferings, and declared that he would devote the rest of his life to the revival and spread of Buddhism (Gore, 1993, p. 250). The actual conversion ceremony to Buddhism took place in 1956, just two months before he died and set in motion the conversion process that brought over three million Indians to the Buddhist fold in the next few years. Most of the converts were former Mahars of Maharashtra.

BUDDHISM AS A RELIGION OF EMANCIPATION

Ambedkar embraced Buddhism because, in his opinion, it was a religion of emancipation, a religion ingrained in which the most egalitarian principle, equal treatment to all human beings, a religion, which was based on the tenets of equality, liberty and fraternity. In one of his most important articles written on Buddhism-*The Buddha and The Future of His Religion*, published in the MahaBodhi (Calcutta) in 1950, Ambedkar wrote, Hinduism is a religion which is not founded on morality. Whatever morality Hinduism has, it is not an integral part of it... The religion of the Buddha is morality. It is embedded in religion. Buddhist religion is nothing if not morality... (Kadam, 1993, p. 123). By morality he meant compassion, caring for one's fellow human being and for the natural world, feeling a sense of responsibility and commitment, being actively committed to the well-being of the world (Fitzgerald, 2007, pp.138-39). Thus, Fitzgerald argues that Buddhism, on this line of reasoning becomes the basis of the new egalitarian

society (Fitzgerald, 2007, p.139). According to Ambedkar, a very significant point about Buddhism was that “He (Buddha) never claimed infallibility for his message... He said that it was open to anyone to question it, test it and find what truth it contained” (Ambedkar, 1992, p. 222). Unlike the Hindu scriptures like

Vedas, Shasta’s, etc., which were not open to abrogation, amendment and even criticism, Buddha’s example of opening his preaching for anybody to question and test was something quite enlightening for a rationalist like Ambedkar. According to him, for Buddha worth and not birth was the measure of man unlike the theory of *chaturvarna* based on birth. This was quite liberating for Dalit’s who were subjected to untold sufferings and humiliations as a result of their low birth. Buddha’s indomitable faith in the capacity of man to shape his own destiny, whereas the lack of recognition of individual’s capacity in Hinduism, revealed to Ambedkar the superiority of Buddhism over Hinduism as a better religion. Though Buddha believed in rebirth and the doctrine of karma, he discarded the belief in transmigration of soul. According to him, “The Buddha’s Law of Karma applied only to karma and its effect on present life. He was the first to say: Reap as you sow” (Ambedkar, 1992, p. 338). For him, the doctrine of Karma is a theory of causation only (Fritzgerald, 2007, p. 141). Regarding rebirth, Buddha said “When elements of a body (Prithvi-earth, Apa-water, Tej-fire and Vayu-wind) join the mass of similar elements floating in (Akash) space, a new birth takes place.” Thus, it is not the soul which takes rebirth, it is the elements of a body which take a new birth. According to Ambedkar, Buddha’s “Dhamma (religion) is social.” “It is righteousness, which means right relation between man and man in all spheres of life. As such, society cannot do without Dhamma” (Ambedkar, 1992, p. 316). Ambedkar further highlighted the salient and enlightening principles of Buddhism. In his opinion, “Buddhism makes learning open to all (males and females of all castes),” “It breaks down barriers between man and man (in terms of caste division),” “It promotes equality between man and man” (Ambedkar, 1992, p. 271). Buddhism also underlined “Maitri or fellowship towards all must never be abandoned. One owes it even to one’s enemy” (Ambedkar, 1987(a), p. 442). As such, in Buddhism, doors were open to all irrespective of caste or class. Anybody could join the Buddhist Singh. It is however amply clear that what attracted Ambedkar to Buddhism was its message of equality and fraternity, its universal morality, in short, its libertarian philosophy. It was a true religion in the sense of having a social mission. Thus, it is unambiguously clear here that as a proof of the rejection of Hinduism as well as due to the emancipatory nature of Buddhism, Ambedkar got converted and advised his followers to do the same. Thus, conversion into Buddhism formed one of the important bases of a new consciousness and essential components of what has come to be known today as Ambedkarism (for details see Mohapatra, 1999) and gave birth to a new category called neo-Buddhists.

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY OF DALIT’S

Having seen what an emancipatory religion is and how Buddhism qualifies to be an emancipatory religion and Hinduism does not, let us have a look at the religious identity of Dalit’s-what kind of religion they are identifying with, given that they have strong resentment against Hinduism, and many of them have denounced it for its oppressive elements and adopted other religions, though there are some who continue to identify as Hindus. Even the fact that they are not identifying with any religion assumes significance in this context. The Table 1 reveals the religious identity of Dalit students of the sample. The following Table shows that 45/100 students have identified as Hindus, and an equal number of students have identified as Buddhists. While 1/100 student has stated that his religious inclination is towards Sikhism, 5/100 students have expressed that they have no belief in religion. Interestingly, 3/100 students have stated that Dalit or Dalit upliftment is their religion. Only 1/100 student has not responded with regard to the issue of religious identity.



Table 1: Religious Identification of Dalit Students

**Sr. No. Nature of Religious Identity No. of Students Total
JNU Dr. Bamu**

1	Hinduism	32	13	45
2	Buddhism/Neo-Buddhism	09	36	45
3	Sikhism	01	--	01
4	No Belief in Religion	04	01	05
5	Dalit/Dalit Upliftment	03	--	03
6	Non-Response	01	--	01
	Total	50	50	100

Source: Field data

Let us analyze the data with more field inputs. Out of the 64 per cent students (32/50) identifying as Hindus in JNU, one student says that his religion is Hinduism, but he is in the thoughtful process of adopting Buddhism. And, interestingly, elsewhere, he says that he is an atheist. At the same time, he admits that he sometimes visits some Hindu temples and religious sites, not in religious ritual sense but for a sort of cultural amalgamation of mind. Another student notes, "Though I am a Hindu, but I am in search of a true religion." Another student identifies himself as a Hindu, but when asked whether he is a religious person, he replies, "Yes, I am a Christian." Making it clear that he believes in god, a student states, "I am a Hindu, but I am not really a religious person. I believe in god because of future and misfortune, but we want to have deities, which will not be dictated by Brahmins." Another student, who claims as a Hindu, notes, "I worship only Hanuman and observe fast on Tuesdays, but I do not go to any temples." At the same time, he says that he is not a religious person. Another student makes an interesting claim when he says, "I am a Hindu by birth, but I do not believe in any religious system." The same respondent admits that he worships Hindu deities, but claims that he is not a religious person. Another Hindu respondent notes, "I am a religious person. I do have strong faith in the existence of god. This however does not mean that I am swayed away by religion. I believe in religion, but do not discriminate individuals on the basis of religion." Another student, who identifies herself as a Hindu, responds to the question, if she is a religious person in the following way-"I am an atheist and a feminist." On the other hand, out of the 26 per cent students (13/50) identifying as Hindus from Dr. Bamu, surprisingly, one student from the Mahar community identifies himself as a Hindu. It is surprising, because Mahars generally identify with Buddhism and Mangs with Hinduism. To account for this discrepancy, he states that the caste certificate bears his religion as Hinduism, but truly, he believes in Buddhism. One student, however, clearly states, "I am a Hindu, and I am a religious person, but I do not have any *andhasraddha* (blind faith). I have only *shraddha* (faith)." Another student notes, "Till 8th class, I used to believe in religion, rituals, but I do not believe in religion, caste system, etc., any longer." However, he states that his religion is Hinduism and sub-caste is Mang. Another student, who identifies as a Hindu, states, "I am not a religious person. Buddhism is good, but people have made it bad. The philosophy of all religions is not good, not scientific. So I don't believe in any religion." Another student notes, "I am a Hindu, but honestly I only believe in humanity. I just don't like religion." Interestingly, there is one Mang community respondent who has identified himself as a Hindu, yet has evinced interest in Buddhism. According to him, "I am a religious person. In future, I may convert to Buddhism. I like many principles of Buddhism." What do all these show? They show that respondents, who are identifying with Hinduism, do not have a settled mind, and are, in fact, in an ambivalent state with regard to the question of religion. It is understandable, given the historicity of Hinduism and the place of Dalits in it. There are many who are born as Hindus because their parents are Hindus, and they have not adopted any other religion. Even though they know the role of Hindu religion in their social status, still they are not decisive with regard to the question of religion. Another important thing is that most Indians are religious. Probably for all these reasons, they identify as Hindus, but the internal discontent finds expression in the form of varied and, very often, contradictory/confused



statements. With regard to Buddhism/neo-Buddhism, as stated earlier, there are 18 per cent students of the sample of JNU (9/50) and 72 per cent of the sample of DR. BAMU (36/50) who claim to be Buddhists/neo-Buddhists. One student notes, "I am a Buddhist and religious, but I don't accept any dogmas without analyzing it." Another student notes, "I don't believe in worshipping god. I believe in Buddhism and try to internalize its values in my life." Rejecting gods and rituals, a student states, "I am a Buddhist, but I am not religious because I don't believe in worshipping gods or deities and indulging in rituals." A Buddhist identifying student argues, "I believe in religion, but I am not religious. A religious person believes in myths and superstitions, and I don't believe in these things." Interestingly, a student states, "I

believe in religion but not like Hindus believe in Hinduism. I believe in Buddhism as a *margadarshak* (guide)." Another student simply puts, "I believe in Buddhism because it offers a scientific view of life." Similarly, another student notes, "I am a Buddhist, and I believe in humanity." However, there are some respondents who state their views in a little puzzling manner. A student, who identifies himself as a Buddhist, says, "I believe in religion but not in Buddhism and Hinduism. They are superstitious." Similarly, another Buddhist identifying student states, "I believe in Buddhism as well as Christianity." Another student notes, "I believe in religion, but I am not really religious. However, I sometimes go to temples or do prayer." Making multi-religious inclination clear, a Buddhist identifying student states, "I believe in religion, and I am religious. I do *vipasana* (meditation) of Buddhism. I also like to pray in Muslim *darghas* (religious place) and Catholic churches." The above statements show that most students identifying as Buddhists are

relatively sure and well settled in their ideas about the question of religion, unlike most students identifying as Hindus. This is because Buddhism is a religion they have adopted after leaving Hinduism. The reasons and logic are quite clear to them, and this is reflected in their identification and explanation. Similarly, many of them quite emphatically put it across that they believe in religion, but they are not religious in the ritualistic sense. This, however, does not mean that there are no students who seem to be confused. In fact, as stated above, it is clear that about 3 or 4 students identify themselves as Buddhists but contradict this by saying that they do not believe in Buddhism, or they also believe in some other religions. As stated earlier, only 1 student (1/100) identifies with Sikhism. However, she also seems to be confused regarding her religious inclination. She mentions, regarding her religious identity, Hinduism and Sikhism, but she asserts that she is

more inclined towards Sikhism. When she is asked whether she is religious, she notes that, though she is not an atheist, she does not, however, believe in a particular religion. The ambivalence is quite evident from this. However, there are 5 students (5/100) who do not believe in any religion at all. In this regard, one student states, "I don't take opium." Another student notes, "I don't believe in religion, but I do believe in the existence of a supreme being who is not bound by any religion." Another student very clearly states, "The religion of my parents is Hinduism, but I have not thought concretely anything on it. Honestly I believe neither in Buddhism nor in Hinduism. It may be because of my political activism in left culture." Regarding religious identity, another student argues, "Is 5000 years of exploitation not enough?" The one student from DR. BAMU who states that he does not believe in religion is from the Mang community. Again, it is the only Mang community student who has expressed such an opinion. According to him, "All should be treated equal, and there should be no discrimination. Religions allow discrimination. So, I don't believe in religion."

Interestingly, there are 3 students (3/100) who have mentioned Dalit or Dalit upliftment as their religion. All of them are from JNU, and are engaged in Dalit activism. As one student notes, "My identity is that of a Dalit, and my religion is Dalit upliftment." Another student states, "My religion is Dalit upliftment. I can't be religious in a conventional sense because being religious means having the right to temple entry, and we have been historically barred from temple entry." The religious data present a very interesting picture. While Dalit identifying as Hindus are a little confused, those who identify as Buddhists are a little



sure of their religious identity. However, those who do not believe in any religion are quite certain of their position in this regard. Even those, who consider Dalit or Dalit uplift as their religion, in a way, denounce the belief in a religion. Religion has always been an emotive and sensitive issue for many, and it is more so for Dalit. So, when it comes to the question of religion and religious identity, the discomfiture is quite palpable, and it is also understandable. Thus, what becomes apparent from the analysis is that a majority, i.e., 91/100 students do identify with religion. It suggests that religion or religious identity continues to be important in the lives of Dalit's. A very minuscule number of Dalit's (at the most 9/100), as apparent, claim to denounce a religious identity. However, what is interesting is that Buddhism seems to be emerging as a religion of choice for Dalit once they disown a Hindu identity. This is the choice Ambedkar made and since then Buddhism has become the favored religion for many Dalit, though it is also true that not all Dalit have given up their Hindu identity. With a little help from Karl Mannheim's (1940) sociology of knowledge perspective, we can understand the ambivalence of Hindu Dalit or the assertive nature of Buddhist Dalit or the aggressive nature of those Dalit who denounce a religious identity. Dalit's who retain their Hindu identity are not comfortable with this identity because it is the religion that has created all the woes and ills for them and, at the same time, they do not wish to adopt any other religion. So, caught in such a situation, they exhibit an unsettled and uncomfortable state of mind in regard to their religion and religious identity. Similarly, those who identify with Buddhism are quite assertive and comfortable with such an identity because it is an identity Ambedkar patronized and they have adopted after disowning the Hindu identity. So, a sense of assertion is visible because of a different and better identity. On the other hand, those who (very few of course) denounce any religious identity are quite critical and truculent of religion. They condemn religion for engendering and perpetuating the inhuman conditions and status of Dalit's in Indian society. It is also noteworthy that if we look at the data of non-Hindu identification (55/100), then it also tells a story—a story that highlights the problems in Hinduism. If we read this with the data of those who have identified with Hinduism, many of whom have exhibited a discomfort, then we have a very worrying scenario for the Hindu society. This situation may be better understood from the sociology of knowledge perspective which points out that the nature of religious identification is conditioned by the fact of the specific location of Dalit's in Indian society. Being Dalit's determines the way they approach, understand, look at and make sense of their religious identity. Had they not been Dalit's, they would have a different way of looking at their religious identity.

INSPIRED ACTIONS—LEARNING FROM THE EMANCIPATOR

Forty-five years later since Ambedkar changed his religion in 1956, in the year 2001, Ram Raj—a Dalit Indian Revenue Service official—got involved in an inspired action and gave a call to Dalit's to assemble in Delhi to convert to Buddhism. The conversion did take place. Though the number was not in millions, but the fact that, despite police intervention to stop such a mass conversion initiative, thousands gathered and got converted has its symbolic significance, which is not unfathomable. Ram Raj said that Dalit's would embrace Buddhism to liberate themselves from the bondage of caste and he had indicated that similar ceremonies would be held in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. In fact, he said that this was the beginning of a “social revolution.” He received support from the Buddhist Society of India, and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India. His success in drawing a considerable number of people for his effort spoke for the disillusionment of Dalit's with the Hindu religion. In a similar action in Odisha, Dalit's in large number got converted to Buddhism. Not only Dalit's are giving up their Hindu identity in a highly publicized manner and adopting Buddhism, but also most of them are proclaiming a Buddhist identity, whether converted or not. They find Buddhism liberating as was reasoned by Ambedkar, and we should not forget that Buddhism itself was a protest movement against Hinduism. So the symbolic value could also be traced from this fact. Since Dalit's



want to protest against their systematic exploitation and ill-treatment within Hinduism, Ambedkar and they have chosen a protest religion i.e., Buddhism.

WARNING FOR THE HINDU SOCIETY

After more than sixty-eight years of Independence and implementation of the positive discrimination and championing the principle of social justice and social democracy, it is apparent that not much has changed. There are still caste atrocities, inhuman and sub-human treatment meted out to Dalit's. It is not that there has not been any improvement in their existential conditions, but it is so with a minority section of the community and that to mostly from the urban areas where secondary relations operate, namelessness is a *fait accompli* and secular achievements prevail. This is not to suggest that urban areas have been completely ridden of caste and its oppressive ideology. On the other hand, in the rural areas, there is still the feudal and upper caste mentality, which has not shown its loosening grip. There is still the practice of untouchability despite favorable constitutional and legislative provisions and increasing role of civil society. Through conversion from one religion to another, Dalit's want to remind the caste Hindus that "if you continue with your caste ignominies, we will give the Hindu identity." The data on religious identification have also drawn our attention to the persistence of caste-based practices in the Hindu society that, it may be argued, may instigate more non-Hindu identification in future. This is not something that the society should be comfortable with. Mass conversion ceremonies do not reflect a good image of the society rather it draws wide attention to the problems of caste. Therefore, in today's time, there is a need of serious introspection to make the society more humane and just by making caste redundant in social life.

CAUTION AND LESSON FOR DALITS

It is true that Dalit's are not a homogeneous category. They are homogeneous only in so far as their suffering from the caste-based discrimination and ill-treatment is concerned. While they strive for emancipation, they need to take note of contradictions from within. They must take note of the fact that there is caste ranking and the practice of untouchability among them. They do not inter-marry with other Dalit's. Even after conversion, Hindu beliefs, rites and customs do not really disappear from their minds. They remain very much caste conscious in inter-personal dealings and particularly in the case of marriage. As Neera Burra explains, Buddhists in Marathwada still observe many Hindu customs and even worship many Hindu gods (cited in Gupta, 2001, p. 10). Dipankar Gupta, similarly, says that "All castes believe in caste ideology." He further says that More often than not, it is not the idea of caste that the sub-altern castes find offensive, but their positioning in the hierarchical order...They do not wish to have this stigma (untouchability) attached to them but consider it justified in the case of the other so-called "untouchables" (Gupta, 2001, p. 10).

It is also true that not all Dalit's intend to leave Hinduism even though they vociferously reject and attack the despicable social recognition imposed on them. Some of them probably expect that one day the secular state would bring an end to the caste system. Thus, these contradictions from within, which may have developed as a result of long association with the Hindu social order, make it really difficult, if not impossible, to do away with the pervasive and resilient caste and its oppressive mechanisms. Dalit's need to be aware of these aspects and address them urgently, otherwise a dignified identity construction would be at risk within the Hindu-fold or even outside it, conversion notwithstanding.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Had conversion solved the caste problem, it would not have been there after 1956 when Ambedkar got converted. Ambedkar, in fact, wanted to change the attitude of the caste Hindus because he believed it



to be very important, even more important than legislations, for liberation from caste indignities. When he failed to usher in any discernible change in the attitude of the caste Hindus that he declared his intention to leave Hinduism during 1935–36. So the Hindu society must take note of this fact that Dalit's do not wish to leave Hinduism; Hinduism through caste and untouchability is forcing them to consider option of conversion. If tomorrow Hinduism is reformed and caste and untouchability is gone for good, then no one will perhaps leave Hinduism. However such a situation can happen, if Indian society strives to base, realistically, itself on “ethics of human rights” (Baxi, 2002, pp. 7-12), which enjoin on us to respect the other as co-equal human. This also comes from the religious values of Buddhism. Thus the modern society must base itself on such values to make it look modern and human. Indian society, if it wants to be modern, has to be an inclusive society whose framework can be deduced from the religious values of Buddhism or the ethics of human rights, which are already enshrined in the Constitution of India. The state and society have to just follow them in letter and spirit.

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