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## NEO-BUDDHIST MOVEMENTS AND DEPRESSED CLASS IN MODERN NORTH INDIA

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The Neo Buddhist movement (also known as the Buddhist movement for Dalits, Ambedkarite Buddhist movement) is a religious as well as a socio-political movement among Dalits in India which was started by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Dr Ambedkar re-interpreted Buddhism and created a new school of Buddhism popularly known as Navayana. The movement sought to be a socially and politically engaged form of Buddhism.*

*The movement was launched in 1956 by Ambedkar when nearly half a million Dalits- family untouchables- joined him and converted to Buddhism. It rejected Hinduism challenged the caste system in India and promoted the rights of the Dalit community. As far as Navayana understanding of Buddhism goes, one finds a conspicuous departure from the teaching of Mahayana, Theravada and Vajrayana traditions of Buddhism, instead the movement claims to be a form of engaged Buddhism as taught by Ambedkar. This movement was proposed for elevating the lot of former untouchables and also with the prime objective of helping them achieve dignity and self-respect. It emerged with a hope that Buddhist principles would mobilise them into a robust community enabling them to put up a fight against caste-based discrimination existing in society. The twenty-two vows were the 22 Buddhist vows that were administered by B.R. Ambedkar during the time of conversion, were believed to be the guidelines of the social revolution that*

*motivated human instincts. These vows demonstrated both the social movement aspect of Navayana Buddhism, and also its core deviation from earlier sects of Buddhism.*

*This paper looks into spread and impact of the Neo-Buddhist movement on the depressed classes of North Indian regions. The movement may be viewed as a movement for identity assertion in the depressed classes. The research is based on Qualitative method and textual analysis. It was also found that Neo Buddhists became more progressive after taking the path of Buddha.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Neo Navayan, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, North India, Depressed Class, Religion*

## INTRODUCTION:

Buddhism originally originated in India in the sixth century B.C. Every Indian takes pride in this phenomenon, because it is one of the world's greatest religions when we look back to imagine what India's spiritual and social structure was like in the sixth century B.C. They can see that it was a time when numerous princely states dispersed around the country and had a prominent Hindu religious system.<sup>i</sup> Vedic Hinduism was already in vogue when Buddhism was founded by Gautama Buddha in 532 BC. The Vedic ideology and philosophy had formed an integral part of Indian society. Therefore, Buddhism had to include a few of its philosophies into its system so it could be acceptable among the local people and provide a path for more Buddhist followers.

The Hindu society was hierarchal and divided into four statuses namely Brahmin (priest), Kshatriya (warriors), Vaishya (merchants), and Shudra (servants). This system was largely based on wealth and profession which had roots in the Indus civilization and which exist to date among the Hindus though the system was abolished by the government of India. The Brahmins still hold the power and enjoy special privileges for their knowledge of Sanskrit and Vedas, which is required to perform all religious functions and ceremonies. Buddha was from the uppermost cast, but he never really followed the Brahmins and later become an opposition to the caste system.<sup>ii</sup> Buddhism has traditionally been a nonviolent peaceful sect and many people today turn to Buddhism for guidance and peace as a result of its growing popularity in various parts of the world. It also covers the Buddhist viewpoint on what causes violence, how to stop it, and how to achieve peace<sup>iii</sup>.

An excellent place to begin is the Buddhist attitude towards the Indian caste system (which is based on hierarchy rather than social equality). In Buddhism, egalitarianism is valued as social moral conduct according to the Buddha.

*“Not by birth does one become an outcaste, not by birth does one become a*

*Brahmin. By (one's) action one becomes a Brahmin outcast, by (one's) action*

*One becomes a Brahmin”*

So, despite being born in a certain class It is believed that a person can rise above it if their abilities and efforts allow them to. Although Buddhism developed inside a Hindu conceptual framework it was opposed to the caste system from the beginning and believe that anybody can achieve Nirvana. Hence, Buddhist sangha was open to all regardless of social background as Buddhism expanded from India. It accommodates the particular social system it came up against.<sup>iv</sup>

### **AMBEDKAR AND NEO BUDDHISM**

It is important to remember Dr. Ambedkar's role in creating modern India. He had led millions of the downtrodden to a life of self-respect, honour, and accountability. Dr. Ambedkar always emphasized the value of Improving education by delineating social status. He was mainly known for his capability of framing the Indian constitution and adopting India to become independent. Dr. Ambedkar started the revival of Buddhism in India which has risen after his death and continues to grow today among countless followers.

On April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1891 Ambedkar was born at Mhow, in Madhya Pradesh. His father Ram Ji was an army office station Mhow Madhya Pradesh.<sup>v</sup> He was born in a community of Dalits who suffered the most for the practice of untouchability. As a young boy, he was rejected on his way home in a bullock cart without a drop of water till midnight. Ambedkar faced discrimination from the Dalit community because his school teacher did not touch his notebook. From his early childhood, Dr. Ambedkar noticed the curses of the Indian caste system. He had undergone many painful events during his early education.<sup>vi</sup>

Three key principles make up Ambedkar's social philosophy (1) liberty (2) equality (3) fraternity. Firstly, Ambedkar fights with Society to gain political power and human right in India. Ambedkar proclaimed in front of the general audience, "I was born as Hindu but I would not die as a Hindu" and that Ambedkar noticed the discrimination of Dalits people by the higher caste people in India.<sup>vii</sup>

Ambedkar began to develop a respect for Buddha when K.A. Keluskar provided a Marathi language of his new book "The life Buddha" on the occasion of Ambedkar passing his matriculation exam in 1907, which was organized by the head of Satya - Shodhak movement, S. K. Bole. He studied Buddhism deeply and extensively and influenced many others who had developed an interest in it. He was greatly influenced by the writing of the Tamil Buddhists, particularly P. L. Narasu and Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, a radical social reformer from Maharashtra in the nineteenth century. He visited Burma and Ceylon to receive how Buddhism was

practiced there.<sup>viii</sup> Ambedkar rejected the idea that achieving moksha or salvation of the soul is the sole aim of a person's life. He rejected this viewpoint due to his belief in the theory of an att (no soul) of Buddhism if everything is temporary how can there possibly be a permanent soul? Ambedkar accepted Buddhism for this reason, first of all Buddhism teachers (Pragyan) that is the meaning of understanding under superstitions and supernaturalism, and second turn karma which the meaning of love and, last same (equality) all are included in Ambedkar's view of man's life good and happy.<sup>ix</sup> He believed that Buddhism was on feasible option since it was more democratic ethical and equality. Buddhism is undoubtedly established by reason. It has a flexibility that no other religion has and it is a natural part of it.<sup>x</sup> The Ambedkar version of Buddhism is distinct from Buddhism as practiced in the past. The emphasis on monastic life meditation enlightens karma and rebirth and the personal element of the ancient scriptures. Buddha's and Bodhisattvas' divine intervention magic and ritual practice and the cosmic reels of time and space are all missing. The philosophical and philological theories of Abhidbammikas, Madhyamikas, and Yogacharian have no place in Ambedkar's Buddhism and the four noble truths which Ambedkar considered to be the misguided interpellation of monastic editors of Buddha's sermon are also absent.<sup>xi</sup> Ambedkar eventually came to the conclusion that Buddhism is superior religion that promotes liberation and human freedom. Ambedkar adhered to the teaching of Buddha on social, intellectual, economic, and political independence as well as the principle of non-violence. He promoted equality not just between men and men but also men and women<sup>xii</sup>.

Conversion to Buddhism is a deliberate process. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism was a result of political factors. He believed that the Indian national congress was unable and unwilling to improve the living condition of the untouchable he claimed that the Indian national congress was willing to grant several benefits to Muslims but would not do the same for the Hindu untouchable.<sup>xiii</sup> So, he decided to convert to Buddhism. On October 1935 the leaders of the depressed met in Yelola (Nasik) to assess the social and political situation considering their 15-year fight following the constitutional then reform. Then Ambedkar proclaim unfortunately I was born in Hindu untouchable. It was beyond my power to stop that but it is within my power to reject to live under ignoble and humiliating I humbly assure you that I will not die a Hindu.<sup>xiv</sup> He is express his famous speech on his way to emancipation (mukti kon pathe) which was

*"if you want to gain self-respect,*

*Change your religion;*

*If you desire independence,*

*Change your religion;*

*If you want equality,*

*Change your religion;*

*If you wish to create a society that ensures cooperation and brotherhood,*

*Change your religion;*

*Change your religion;<sup>xv</sup>.*

Finally, the great conversion event at Nagpur on 14 October 1956 when Ambedkar brought quickly half a million people to fold that Buddhism was infected a great miracle never in the history of any religion in the world, so many people at one time and at religion.<sup>xvi</sup> Ambedkar rejected the Mahayana Hinayana concept and he says accepting the ethical value of the Buddhist religion is called new Buddhism.

Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar a prominent Indian Buddhist leader. He founded Neo Buddhism as social philosophy it is a sub-sect of Buddhism. The kind of Buddhism he accepted and spread is known as Neo Buddhism (Navayana) in history. He introduces the name of Navayana (new vehicle) to refer to his new religious movement. This navayana was considered as a direct example of the early Buddhist lineage's previous tradition. Some distinctly contemporary modernist elements can be found in Ambedkar's Neo Buddhism. Neo Buddhism does not give any role to the spiritual part of ancient Buddhism. It rejects the idea that Buddha delivered any sermon about the hereafter. It adapts all of Buddha's teaching to the realities of contemporary society.<sup>xvii</sup> Neo Buddhism is definitely down to earth it would modify the problem of untouchability leading to discrimination gross ignorance and static degraded social status. Neo-Buddhism emerged as an option to this depressing situation of always being at the lowest. In this sense, Neo Buddhism is distinct and probably unparallel in the history of religion.<sup>xviii</sup> In the context of Neo Buddhism Ambedkar has said" Morality is Dhamma and Dhamma is morality. "

### **IMPACT OF NEO BUDDHISM ON DEPRESSED CLASS**

When we refer to Neo-Buddhism here, we usually mean the first group of Maharashtra who converted to Buddhism in 1965 at Nagpur along with Ambedkar and their successor. A survey was conducted by the Gokhale Institute of Research Poona 1962 at Bombay to assert the impact of changing religion on the schedule cast. According to the research the schedule cast was greatly impacted. The story went on to say that the scheduled Cast member is now united and has become one. They are attempting to construct a cast-free society based on Buddhist values. They have a great deal of pride in Buddhism. They lead an honourable respectful life in society.<sup>xix</sup>

Another report by Arun Sindhu in 1978 shows the impact of Buddhism on Indian society.

The ex-untouchable have overcome their inferiority complex and developed new identities and levels of confidence. There is a new cultural and social renaissance that has changed the youth who now feel that only perseverance education and a logical approach can lead to advancement.

There has been just a small shift in the newly educated Buddhist population's economic situation; for the most part. They are still at the same level as before their conversion. But the controversial transition from blind faith to logical thinking has given rise to outstanding hunger for education and knowledge among the Buddhist youth.<sup>xx</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Neo-Buddhist movement in India was called the Dr. Ambedkar Buddhist movement. The last reformer in the social context of Buddhism was Dr. Ambedkar who made Knowledge and education the backbone of the nation. Torture, depression, deprivation, and neglect are not human integration towards another human.

The first three aspects of Neo Buddhist demands are self-respect, human dignity, and social equality. The present-day generation has taken full advantage of the same and has become highly qualified. They have availed the reservation facilities and got into good jobs. Now very seldom do we see uneducated Neo Buddhists. Self-confidence and boldness are manifest in them and they cannot tolerate injustice.

This generation's disposition toward the Neo Buddhists and their standards of living are proportionate to their income. Many housewives of Neo Buddhists are well educated and some of them are even postgraduates in different fields. In a neo-Buddhist family, the couple works in different offices.

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