

Towards a Meaningful Spirituality

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BABASAHEB AMBEDKAR WAS undoubtedly one of the greatest leaders of modern India. Hailed for his pioneering efforts in struggles for justice and equality for the oppressed 'low' castes and for framing the Indian Constitution, it was his role in reviving Buddhism in the land of its birth, from where it had almost completely disappeared over the centuries, that, as this brilliantly inspiring *book argues, was his crowning achievement. In 1956, along with tens of thousands of his followers, Babasaheb converted to Buddhism, following which vast numbers of other Indians have, over the years, found meaning in acceptance of the doctrine of the Buddha.

This book provides a fascinating account of the gradual evolution of Ambedkar's religious thought that finally culminated in his momentous decision to convert to Buddhism. The author, a well-known British Buddhist monk, speaks from years of experience of working among Buddhists in India and abroad and from his own personal interactions with Ambedkar before and after the latter's conversion to Buddhism. He succinctly summarises Ambedkar's critique of Brahminical Hinduism, from the point of view of both ethics and social justice, and illustrates how Ambedkar, acutely conscious of the importance of religion in personal as well as social life, came to be convinced that Buddhism was the best choice, not just for his fellow oppressed Dalits but for other Indians as well, and, indeed, for the whole of humankind.

The book sets out Ambedkar's religious journey by providing details of his evolution as a public figure committed to the emancipation of the Dalits from the oppression of the dominant castes, legitimacy for which is provided by the Brahminical Hindu scriptures. Sangharakshita discusses important life-transforming events in Ambedkar's own life as a victim of 'upper' caste prejudice despite his eminent educational qualifications and the important public positions he occupied, which led him to increasingly realise that the emancipation of the Dalits and other oppressed castes was impossible within the framework of Brahminical Hinduism. He provides details of Ambedkar's initial, pre-conversion struggles against 'upper' caste hegemony, such as leading campaigns to defy bans on entry of Dalits into Hindu temples and their access to public tanks; his dramatic public burning of the draconian *Manusmriti*, the Bible of Brahminism, which, like other Brahminical texts, is premised on the permanent degradation of the Dalits and Shudras; and his consistent opposition to the Congress and its 'upper' caste Hindu leadership for their aversion to the independent mobilisation and emancipation of the oppressed castes and for their consistent defence of 'upper' caste Hindu domination, an agenda that they shared with other right-wing Hindu revivalists who, unlike them, made no pretence of being 'secular', 'democratic' and 'pro-poor'. Frustrated by continued 'upper' caste Hindu opposition to the emancipation of the Dalits, for it directly threatened their own caste and class privileges, in 1935, at the Depressed Classes Conference, Ambedkar famously declared that although he had been born a Hindu, he did not intend to die as one. His break with Hinduism was to be irrevocable. However, he was yet to announce which religion he felt best for himself and for his fellow Dalits.

Sangharakshita then turns to developments in Ambedkar's religious thought in the post-1947 phase, after Ambedkar resigned, in 1951, from Nehru's Cabinet because of, among other reasons, the government's apathy to the Dalits and Nehru's lack of sufficient support to the Hindu Code Bill that he had drafted and which aimed at a radical reform of Hindu

Personal Law. His resignation marked the virtual end of his political career, but, as Sangharakshita shows, it may have been a blessing in disguise for it enabled him to devote more attention than he hitherto had to religious matters, for he was now convinced that without a cultural revolution, which necessarily meant the embracing of an egalitarian and humane religion, mere political representation or economic development of the Dalits and other oppressed castes was meaningless and insufficient to challenge 'upper' caste-class hegemony.

As Sangharaskhita shows, Ambedkar had already read up on Buddhism early on in his life as an activist and showed appreciation for the Buddha's opposition to Brahminism and caste discrimination. As he freed himself from his earlier hectic political activism, he became increasingly involved with the Buddhist cause for its direct relevance to the Dalits in their quest for emancipation. In 1950, he visited Sri Lanka, where he addressed the World Fellowship of Buddhists, appealing to the Dalits of that country to embrace Buddhism. The next year, he compiled the *Buddha Upasana Patha*, a collection of Buddhist devotional texts. In 1954, he paid two visits to Burma, and the next year he founded the Bharatiya Bauddha Mahasabha, or the Indian Buddhist Society, and announced that henceforth he would devote himself to propagating Buddhism in India. Then, in 1956, along with almost 400,000 men and women, mostly from his own Mahar caste, Ambedkar took the *tri sarana*, the Three Refuges, and the *pancha shila*, the Five Precepts, embracing Buddhism at Nagpur in what was probably the largest mass conversion event in world history. Sangharakshita describes the conversion experience as immensely liberating for those who participated in it, for it provided them a new identity and sense of self in their quest to break the shackles of caste and untouchability that the 'upper' castes had thrust on them for millennia. He also mentions in passing, though one wishes he had provided more details, of his own involvement in propagating Buddhism among Dalits after, and inspired by, Ambedkar's own conversion.

Sangharakshita elaborates at length as to how Ambedkar himself envisaged the Buddhist conversion movement. His renunciation of Hinduism was not, he makes clear, directed at individual 'upper' caste people, but, rather, against Brahminism as an inegalitarian ideology and a politico-cultural system that was premised on the degradation of a vast section of humanity based simply on birth. Since Hinduism was premised on caste, and most forms of Hinduism were based on the untenable notion of Brahmin supremacy, it posed, Ambedkar believed, a permanent, impassable barrier to the quest for self-respect of the historically oppressed castes, who formed the majority of the Indian population. In contrast, the Buddha strongly denounced caste discrimination, and so his religion, Ambedkar stressed, was ideal not just for the oppressed castes but also for other Indians, who, too, in his view, needed to be liberated from caste consciousness and meaningless dogma in the name of religion and culture in order to be truly humane. Unlike Islam and Christianity, Ambedkar pointed out, Buddhism was an Indic religion, and conversion to it would not involve acceptance of a foreign culture—Arabic, in the case of the former, or Western, in the case of the latter. As he explained, '[...] Buddhism is part and parcel of the Bharatiya culture. I have taken care that my conversion will not harm the tradition of the culture and history of this land.' Moreover, Ambedkar believed that the ancestors of many Dalits had once been Buddhists and that they had been turned by the Brahmins into Untouchables precisely because of their religion, which the Brahmins saw as a rival to their authority and hegemony. In other words, for Ambedkar, the mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism also served to revive the glorious historical Buddhist legacy of their ancestors, which had been destroyed by Brahminical revivalists as well as Islamic iconoclasts, both of who were responsible for the disappearance of Buddhism from the land of its birth through active persecution of Buddhists.

As Ambedkar saw Buddhism as the religion of the new age, including for his own fellow Dalits, he also stressed the need for reforms in the Buddhist monastic community, the *Sangha*, to make it more socially engaged and relevant to the laity. He critiqued world-

renouncing tendencies that had crept into the *Sangha*, which, he noted, were against the philosophy of the Buddha himself. Members of the Buddhist Sangha had to be concerned about the material and spiritual conditions and welfare of people, rather than restricting themselves to meditation alone or content simply with the quest for their own enlightenment. If the Sangha was to serve as a model of the ideal society, to provide intellectual leadership to people, to render free practical service to them and to retain their links with them, Ambedkar believed that there was much need for reform. Commenting on the conditions of the Buddhist monks or bhikkhus in the Buddhist-majority parts of South-East Asia, he commented that 'a very large majority are merely Sadhus and Sannyasis spending their time in meditation or idleness. There is in them neither learning nor service.' By focusing only on their own spiritual quest, and being indifferent to the sufferings of the world, many bhikkhus, he sadly noted, had given up the Buddhist ideal of service to others. Accordingly, Sangharakshita writes, Ambedkar suggested important reforms in the *Sangha*, hoping that bhikkhus would emulate, in some respects, the Catholic Jesuits in terms of education and social involvement. That would not be an innovation though, for it was thoroughly in keeping with the spirit of the Buddha's own life. He also expected them to play a more central and active role in spreading the message of the Buddha so that Buddhism would once again expand and flourish in India.

This eminently inspiring book is a must-read for everyone concerned about the struggle for social justice in India as well as for those seeking a more meaningful spirituality. It definitely deserves to reach more than a narrow English-knowing readership and certainly ought to be translated into various regional languages. □□□

***AMBEDKAR AND BUDDHISM**

by Sangharakshita

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