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Chapter I

Dr. Ambedkar in Search of Religion

Dr. Ambedkar who along with Mahatma Gandhi was the co-founder of the Indian State was incurably religious, but in an exceptional way. Feelings and emotions for religion were not so important for him; instead its utility in shaping the collective behaviour of a society was essential for him. It must be stated at the outset that Dr. Ambedkar's interest to study religion was social, not academic. This is clear from two things we find in his writings on this subject. The first thing we find are his critiques of current religions and advice for reforming them, and the second are his dilemmas as he searched for the religion best suited for Dalits. He was looking for a religion which could incorporate them in its society as equals and in this way help them to reclaim their *selfhood*. He proceeded to systematically identify the root purpose of religion in society and assessed whether or not a religion had subsequently evolved on this line. His voluminous writings published in the series *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches* indicate that his thoughts emerged from years of thinking, reflecting weighing, assessing and studying various religious philosophies and political ideologies. But he was not one to be satisfied by being a faithful adherent; rather he wanted to dismantle the old and recreate religion anew in his line of conviction i.e. to offer people dignity and equality.

The significance of this for those studying religion lies in the way he understood its relevance in his times and context. But let us first introduce our star Dr. Ambedkar, who is the subject of our study.

1. Who was Dr. B.R. Ambedkar?

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (April 14, 1891–December 6, 1956) was born in Mhow (central India)¹ a town well known for its large garrison. He was a nationalist and a contemporary of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948), Mohammed Jinnah (1876–1949), Vallabhbhai Patel (1875–1950), Abdul Kalam Azad (1887–1958) and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964).² He became the first Law Minister of independent India and is known for his contribution to social equality for the Scheduled Castes. Much has been written on his life and work. For our study, however, it is necessary to know his religious upbringing. It is known that his family kept the palanquin of the village goddess for which they were held in prestige in their community. Although the family

¹ His parents were Ramji Sakpal and Bhimabai who were by caste Mahar, a community that was regarded among the Untouchables. He was the fourteenth child. His father was a minor officer in the Indian army. Dr. Ambedkar unlike many other Dalits was not deprived in extreme ways.

² Judith M Brown. *Modern India: The Origins of an Asian Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, pp. 423-427.

followed the *bhakti* or the devotional stream of the Hindu tradition, it is unclear if they were *Kabirpanthis* or adherents of the Kabir-sect as such.³ For us it will be useful to draw a line under the depressed caste status of the founders of these *bhakti* sects, e.g. Kabir was a weaver and Raidas was a *chamar* or leather-worker. Another feature of the *bhakti* stream was its emphasis on social equality which immediately made it popular among the Dalits.⁴ This is evident in Kabir's poems.

In the path of devotion there are no garbs or pretence
No bias of caste and creed, of high and low;
Who adores God's name is the highest of all and a rare soul.⁵

Such lyrics, which abound in *bhakti*, celebrate the affectionate personal relationship of a devotee with God. For the *bhakti* saints God is not *nirguna* or impersonal force, but is personal and full of good attributes i.e. *saguna*. Themes in the *bhakti* spirituality emphasised awe for the Divine—His name, word, grace, loving devotion and submission to a spiritual master i.e. Guru. At the same time it must be admitted that the Indian poet-saints of the *bhakti* tradition (1300-1600 CE) found little success in changing the social order of caste. Dr. Ambedkar drew attention of the people to this drawback in his speech in 1928 at a meeting convened for planning to construct a temple for Chokamela, a saint of the *bhakti* tradition. He said,

Yet from the view point of the annihilation of caste, the struggle of the saints did not have any effect on society. The value of man (*sic!* human beings) is axiomatic, self-evident; it does not come to him as the result of the gilding of *bhakti*. The saints did not struggle to establish this point.⁶

Consequently the problem of social inequality under which Dalits suffered in Indian society was left unchallenged. This is as far as the background of Dr. Ambedkar's family concerns us; let us now turn our attention to the boy Bhim.

Education was not open for children of the Scheduled Caste families. They normally followed the trade of their families. However for some bright children—particularly boys—exceptions were made. Bhim was an intelligent boy but he was discriminated in school, for instance, by being made to squat separately in the class on a

³ Flood notes that poet-saints or sants in north India were from various social backgrounds. Mirabai was a princess, Nanak was a khatri. However, the impact of Kabir (1398-1448) was the greatest. He was born in a Muslim family of weavers. His popularity is due to his bold criticism of the religious practices both of the Muslims and Hindus current in that era. These sants gathered a following around them. So the followers of Kabir were known as Kabirpanthi, of Raidas were the Raipanthi. Cf. Gavin Flood. *An Introduction to Hinduism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2011, p. 144-145.

⁴ Dhananjay Keer, Dr. *Ambedkar: Life and Mission*. Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1992, p. 9.

⁵ V.K.Sethi, *Kabir: The Weaver of God's Name*. Dera: Radha Soami Satsang. Beas. Dera-Baba-Jaimal-Singh, 1998, p. 675.

⁶ B.R. Ambedkar, 'The Value of a Man is Axiomatic, Self-evident' (1928), idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol.17.3, p. 8.

piece of gunny cloth.⁷ To help the boy out of this situation, a Brahmin teacher, who had enrolled him in the school, gave him his own name Ambedkar.⁸ The boy thereafter stopped using his family name Sakpal⁹ that identified him as an Untouchable.¹⁰ Admittedly Gandhi too was ignorant of Dr. Ambedkar's antecedent until his encounter with him at the 1931 second Round Table Conference.¹¹ The Round Table Conferences (1930-32) in London were convened in London to deliberate on the political future of India. Here Dr. Ambedkar, as a representative of the Depressed Classes (the official nomenclature for Dalits in those times), argued and succeeded in procuring his demand for Depressed Classes to separately elect their representatives for the Legislative Assembly in the British-India, besides electing general representatives with all the rest of the people. This was the famous communal award of the then British Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald. Although in 1932 Dr. Ambedkar withdrew this demand at Mahatma Gandhi's behest, his basic demand for a just share of political power for Dalits did not change. The basis of this political demand was articulated in his cry "restore to us the *selfhood*".¹²

Having completed his education from the Elphinstone College, Mumbai, he received a scholarship from Sayajirao Gaekwad, Maharajah of Baroda, to pursue his education overseas.¹³ Sayajirao was committed to social reforms.¹⁴ A brief survey of Dr. Ambedkar's academic track brings a couple of facts to light. The first thing is that religion was not his subject of study at the university and the second one is that a benevolent sponsorship helped to change the destiny of innumerable people. Under the Maharaja's scholarship Dr. Ambedkar did his advanced studies at the Columbia University in U.S. living in New York for three years, 1913 to 1916. Here, in 1915, he submitted his thesis "The Administration and Finances of East India Company" and he was awarded the Masters of Arts. At that time he was

⁷ Keer, Dr. Ambedkar p. 14.

⁸ The mistaken idea among some that this name was a derivation of "Ambvadekar" probably emerges from the fact that the Dr. Ambedkar's family originally came from the village *Ambvade*. Cf. Vasant, Moon. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. New Delhi: National Book Trust of India, 2002, p. 2.

⁹ His full name was "Bhimrao Ramji Sakpal".

¹⁰ Anthropologists like David Blundell have used the term "undercaste" to denote the Untouchables. India Today Vol XXXIII No. 16. April 15-21, 2008, p. 15.

¹¹ Guy Deleary. *India: The Rebel Continent*. New Delhi: MacMillan. 2000, p. 329

¹² A translation cited on the title page of M.S. Gore *The Social Context of an Ideology: Dr. Ambedkar's Political and Social Thought*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1993 is as following: "Imploring, begging and depending on the kindness of others will not *restore to us the selfhood* that we have been robbed off. We have to regain it on our own strength. It is true that the path of protest we have advocated is a difficult one, but our untouchable brethren should not let themselves be cowed down by the fear that the touchables will retaliate against their act of protest. We have to show our determination in our resolve". (emphasis is added).

¹³ This scholarship was of Rs.25/- per month, which shows Maharaja's progressive views of appreciating meritorious students irrespective of caste or class.

¹⁴ Eleanor Zelliot *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors. 2005, p. 313

24 years of age.¹⁵ At this time his interaction with the Afro-American community and the conversations surrounding the fourteenth amendment to the Constitution bringing social equality for all people in the United States impressed him.¹⁶ Having enrolled himself in Gray's Inn for Law and with the London School of Economics for further studies, he returned to Mumbai on August 21, 1917 *via* Colombo. This was also a time of global upheavals. The Bolsheviks had succeeded in their revolution to establish the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1917, bringing the era of the Russian Empire to an end. At the same time the Great War 1914-1918 was raging in Europe. These events were associated with revolutionary changes in the world especially in the field of economics and politics. Communism was going to redraw the international boundaries of many traditional Christian and Buddhist countries. The impact on these is evident on Dr. Ambedkar's theoretical outlook. He believed that it was possible to radically change society.

Under the agreement of his scholarship, Dr. Ambedkar was appointed as the Military Secretary to the Maharaja.¹⁷ But the religious sensibilities of his subordinates in his office were such that they observed a careful distance from him. As the situation became unbearable he left his job and went to Mumbai where he started his career in the legal world. His help to Dalits made him known as the "poor man's barrister". On January 27, 1919, while in India, he testified to the Southborough Committee about the large numbers of those affected by untouchability and argued that their proportionate representation was important to make government truly representative.¹⁸ This was the beginning of his political life also.¹⁹ On January 31, 1920 having started a fortnightly newspaper *Mooknayak* (Organizer of the Silenced) with the help of Sayajirao Gaekwad, he published his writings in it.²⁰

In July 1920 he left for London for advanced studies at the London School of Economics where he was awarded the Master of Science. Once in London Dr. Ambedkar also got the Barrister-at-Law for which he had earlier enrolled himself at the Gray's Inn of Law. This time he was sponsored by Chhatrapati Shahu the Maharaja of Kolhapur, who too was a reformist. Meanwhile his doctoral thesis, on which he was

¹⁵ Kamal Kishore Kadam. (Education Minister of Maharashtra State) in Dr. *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*. Vol-6. Mumbai: Education Department. Government of Maharashtra. 1989, p. ix.

¹⁶ In 1866, Congress (United States of America) passed the 14th Amendment to the United States Constitution. This Amendment extended citizenship to the Afro-Americans of the United States. The text of the this 14th Amendment is: "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws". www.usa.gov/official_website_portal visited on 9th June 2012.

¹⁷ Dhananjay Keer. *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1992, p. 34

¹⁸ Vasant Moon. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Life and Mission*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2002, p. 20.

¹⁹ Zelliott *From Untouchable to Dalit*. p. 65.

²⁰ Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar* p. 41.

simultaneously working, was submitted albeit after he had returned to India that was published in 1923 by P.S. King & Son. Ltd. London under a new title.²¹ In this work he showed that the convertibility of the Rupee coin was unstable due to an over-issue of it. This was precarious for the Indian economy. He, therefore, argued for the issuing inconvertible paper currency in lieu of metallic coins.²² For this work he was awarded the degree, Doctor of Science, from the Columbia University in United States.²³ On returning to India he changed his track. Instead of economics he started to work on two fronts. The first front was to practice law to earn a living and the second was his engagement with politics. The agenda of his political life was to become the national representative of the Untouchables. This is clear in his initiatives of setting up a welfare association for those affected by untouchability in 1924 called the *Bahiskrit Hitkarini Sabha* and in starting a newspaper *Bahishkrit Bharat* in 1927 to make the grievances of Dalits public.²⁴ It is very interesting to note that as a politician he had a deep interest in religion. This is the chief focus of our study.

2. Dr. Ambedkar's Response to Religions

His response to religion was not merely theoretical; rather he demonstrated its strategic utility in public. It is very interesting to see that while the nationalists were mobilizing masses to protest against Simon Commission Dr. Ambedkar mobilized Dalits to protest against *Manu*.²⁵ His first public action was to openly burn a copy of *Manusmriti* on the Christmas day of 1927. Composed sometime between 200 B.C.E and 300 C.E. it enumerated the law of the social classes i.e. castes.²⁶ This act was a protest to the resistance put up by the caste minded people to his march at *Mahad*. This march was to assert the right of Dalits to drink water at the Public Chawdar Lake, which was traditionally prohibited to them. Similarly the Temple Entry Movement at Kalaram Temple, at Nasik in 1930 revealed his resolve to fight against religion for the equal rights of Dalits. He objected to religion's support to inequality and untouchability. We can see that these three i.e. religion, caste and untouchability, were thickly knotted. Dr. Ambedkar explained this interconnection theoretically and demonstrated its social impact by highlighting the function of religion. His view of the function of religion was specific and focused. So let me introduce it here.

²¹ The facsimile of the title page of The Problem of the Rupee: Its Origin and Its Solution. in Dr. *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*. Vol-6. Book-3. Mumbai: Education Department. Government of Maharashtra.. 1989, p. 316.

²²B.R. Ambedkar, The Problem of The Rupee (1923) in *Idem Writings and Speeches*. Vol-6. Book-3. Mumbai:1989, pp. 607-613.

²³ Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar*, p. 49.

²⁴ Bidyut Chakrabarty and Rajendra Kumar Pandey. *Modern Indian Political Thought: Text and Context*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2009, p. 30.

²⁵ Bidyut Chakrabarty. *Modern Indian Political Thought*. p. 285.

²⁶ D.S.Sarma, *Hinduism through the Ages*. Mumbai: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1961, p. 269.

People cherish their religion as a source of strength, inspiration, consolation and guidance. Religion also generates a social association at gatherings, festivals and pilgrimages. So we can see religion manifestly in public places but privately individuals are deeply attached to rituals, ceremonies and observances like prayer, fasting and almsgiving.²⁷ Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that such followers did not think that their religion had anything to do with structuring society but regarded it purely as a matter of personal relationship with God. For Dr. Ambedkar, however, this was not what religion was all about. Emphasizing the social utility of religion he pointed out the irrelevancy of personal piety. He wrote,

Religion becomes a source of positive mischief if not danger when it remains individual, private and personal. Equally mistaken is the view that religion is the flowering of special religious instinct inherent in the nature of the individual. The correct view is that religion like language is social for the reason that either is essential for social life and the individual has to have it because without it he cannot participate in the life of the society.²⁸

In his view religion was not a private affair of individuals but a collective function of society. Here he used 'function' in a specific way in line with what an American scholar Charles A. Ellwood had written.²⁹ He figured out three functions of religion from these articles,

1. Religion universalizes social values.
2. Religion spiritualizes social values.
3. Religion is an agency of social control.

Now social values for Dr. Ambedkar were dignity, equality, liberty and fraternity.³⁰ By universalizing these he meant that which has been accepted and practiced globally by its adherents for a long period of time e.g. monogamy among the Christians. In this way religion enables its adherents to accept and to practice its norms in their own particular localities. When individuals do this, they act as approved members of their religious society.³¹ By spiritualizing he meant interconnectivity between all things in the universe. So the human life was full of meaning in the chain of cause-and-effect.³² By social control he meant the moral governance, particularly in controlling human

²⁷ The Gospel of Saint Matthew 6.1-18.

²⁸ B.R. Ambedkar, 'Away From the Hindus' (1936) idem *Writings and Speeches*. Vol-5. Mumbai: 1989, p. 409.

²⁹ Dr. Ambedkar was closely following the ideas of Charles A. Ellwood from his article *The Religious Reconstruction: A sociological View*. New York: The Macmillan, 1922.

³⁰ B.R. Ambedkar, 'Away From the Hindus' (1936), p. 411.

³¹ B.R. Ambedkar, 'Away From the Hindus' (1936), p. 409.

³² B.R. Ambedkar, 'Away From the Hindus' (1936), p. 410.

behaviour in society in which injunctions of religion are much more effective than the law and the State.³³

Dr. Ambedkar's scrutiny of religion was based on this understanding of function. Clearly, this was a reduced view of what religion was all about. Dr. Ambedkar's rejection of deity as central to religious conviction and as dispensable for doing theology caused him to set aside the mystical, emotional and relational aspect of devotee to his/her deity. Consequently he undermined the rich deposit of knowledge containing reflection and speculation on God, his being, and his action. Later in chapter-2 we will take up these and his other ideas for theorizing on religion in a fuller measure. For Dr. Ambedkar caste system and untouchability were diametrically opposed to justice and freedom. If such system and practice were sanctioned by a religion then he argued that that religion had swerved from the right track.

In the Round Table Conferences (1931-32) which deliberated on the Indian Constitution, one of the tense issues among others was to assess the standing of the Scheduled Castes in the arena of national politics. Some had proposed that the Hindu Scheduled castes should be counted along with the rest of the Hindus and that they should not be placed on par with other minorities by granting them separate electorates. Dr. Ambedkar was very discontent with this proposal. He knew that the caste system would never make it possible for the Scheduled Castes who had been assimilated into Hinduism to be respected as equals. As a protest at a conference of the Scheduled Castes at *Yeola* on October 13, 1935, Dr. Ambedkar announced his decision to convert to an egalitarian religion. This became famous as the *Yeola Declaration*.³⁴ In his conversations with Bishop Pickett on November 24, 1936 he expressed his inability at that time to choose which religion he would embrace, because 'it would risk alienating some who were friendly to him'. From what Bishop Pickett noted in his diary we can see religious feeling surging within him. He noted that Ambedkar seemingly felt that his life was not his own, that he had been given the privilege of an education and other advantages for a reason ... for some special destiny.³⁵ For reaching this special destiny he wanted a religion that could change the life of those who were affected by untouchability and help them to repossess their *selfhood*. In this study we will trace his search and see what he found. Dr. Ambedkar died on December 6, 1956 in Delhi. His body was flown to Mumbai for the last rites but no State ceremony was extended to him

³³ B.R. Ambedkar, 'Away From the Hindus' (1936), p. 411.

³⁴ Arthur G. McPhee. *Road to Delhi: Bishop J Waskom Pickett Remembered. 1890-1981*. Bangalore: SAIACS Press, 2005, p. 240.

³⁵ McPhee. *Road to Delhi*. p. 247.

then.³⁶ Later, after thirty six years in April 1990, he was posthumously honoured with the highest national honour of India, *Bharat Ratna*.

3. The Indian Social Context

As we have discussed above, at the heart of the Indian social context is the system of caste. Romila Thapar explains that caste 'requires the existence of hereditary groups determining marriage relations, which are arranged in hierarchical order and perform services for one another. The hierarchy is dependent on occupation, on certain beliefs of purity and pollution, and on continued settlement in a particular geographical location'.³⁷ Before we consider the social context of India from Dr. Ambedkar's perspective let us see what others have observed about it. I will give just two trustworthy witnesses, Dr. Manmohan Singh, the current Prime Minister of India and the excerpt from the Mandal Commission Report, appointed by the Central government of India in 1978 to study the status of Backward Castes. Singh paralleling caste discrimination with apartheid said that, "Even after 60 years of constitutional and legal protection and support, there is still social discrimination against Dalits in many parts of our country. Dalits have faced a unique discrimination in our society that is fundamentally different from the problems of minority groups in general. The only parallel to the practice of untouchability was apartheid."³⁸ This is evidenced in the *Mandal Commission Report* submitted in 1980 (but was made public only in 1990) in the following paragraph:³⁹

Even if the caste model described by us represents an ideal state, yet it does not negate the fact that, the caste system has been the most enduring basis of social organization in India or, that, it has divided the Indian society into a large number of hierarchically arranged high and low castes or, that, the lower castes have suffered crippling social handicaps for centuries as a result of the low caste status. Similarly, despite all the modification that caste has undergone over the ages and, especially after Independence, changes in caste system are representative more of shifts in emphasis than any material alteration in this basic structure.⁴⁰

Granted that social inequality arising out of the caste system has adversely affected the society, the problem is much deeper than this. Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that social inequality had three aspects which make the caste system nearly unchangeable. Firstly, one's interiorizing the idea of caste which makes habits part of a

³⁶ Ivan Koshtka. 'A Tale of Two Funerals: Ambedkar's and Bal Thakreray's' in *Forward Press*. Vol-IV, No.12, December 2012, New Delhi, p. 16.

³⁷ Romila Thapar. *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History* New Delhi.: Oxford University Press. 2000, p. 11

³⁸ *Guardian Weekly* January 5-1.2007

³⁹ Ghua, *India after Gandhi*. p. 635.

⁴⁰ *Mandal Commission Report of the Backward Classes Commission, 1980*. Section 5.3 Social Dynamics of Caste. New Delhi: Akalank Publications, p. 23.

culture; secondly, the rootedness of caste system in religion which makes any attempt to change it almost a taboo and thirdly, the beliefs associated with caste system which gives consolation in times of one's anxiety arising out of identity and moral crisis. As a consequence the system of social inequality has become ingrained and internalized by the people. There is another aspect added to this, it is the quality of resilience of the caste system. The Caste system faced serious challenges from Buddhism in antiquity, the spread of Islam in India in the early medieval times, the spread of Christianity in the modern times, and new ideas like democracy and communism that were introduced during the colonial rule—British, French, Portugal, Dutch and Danes. Under these trying circumstances the caste system proved its capacity like an amoeba to shape its contours without diminishing its contents; and so by developing temporary projections it kept pace with a new age and changing culture, passing over the threats of politicians and reformers. It neither lost its relevance nor was it shelved; rather the fact of its resilience had to be reckoned with as society passed through the passages of time and its culture changed from one generation to another. It attended especially to the question of identity and consciousness— who am I? How can I be righteous? What is my future after I die? And so it kept manifesting itself anew by offering contentment in crisis to every generation. The *Mandal Commission Report* observed that,

Caste has endured over the ages owing to its great resilience; like the proverbial cat, it has nine lives. In fact, no scheme of social organization can survive for long, unless it keeps adjusting with changes in society and is able to produce effective answers to the contemporary problems. It was its basic resilience that enabled caste system to survive the challenges of Buddhism and Islam, the shock of the alien British culture and administration and crusades of Gandhi, Ambedkar and Lohia.⁴¹

In this way the caste system is interlocked with Indian religions, its cultures, its philosophies and its worldviews. The influence of this is so vast that all sections of populace, every ethnic group and all denominations have been affected by internalizing its basics. The basic element is the caste-based-hierarchical society where Brahmins dominate on all the rest below them i.e. *kshatriya*, *vaishya*, *Shudra* and Dalit. Added to the social hierarchy of caste, is the notion of ritual cleanness. Here some are predestined to be clean castes and others are not. So the distinction between the 'clean castes' and 'polluting castes' and those falling in between, is also worked out to the minute detail. As a result the habit to maintain distance from the untouchables and to ensure that what is clean is carefully protected from being fouled has boiled down to become culture. Similarly the compulsive mindset to fall into social hierarchy by voluntarily placing one's group either above or underneath another group, betrays its ingrained

⁴¹ Social Dynamics of Caste. Section 5.3 in *Mandal Commission Report* 1980, p. 23.

feature in culture. This inequality in India is intertwined with the practice of untouchability. Obviously this intertwining is due to the notion of clean and polluted in symbolic world. The consequence of this is that Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims are doubly discriminated, firstly in the wider society and secondly by their co-religionists.

Dr. Ambedkar in his time addressed the problem of social inequality and untouchability not only by pioneering reforms and making provisions to compensate the discriminations suffered by Dalits, but he also set example in his personal life when he married Dr. Sharda Kabir, a saraswat Brahmin, on April 15, 1948 in New Delhi under the Civil Marriage Act, long after the death of his first wife.⁴² In this act of marriage he showed that a way forward to break the boundries of the caste was to encourage intermarriage among various castes.

As we know since 1951 the Indian Parliament has been making statutory provisions to bring respite to the Dalits and also women.⁴³ This was chiefly done by reserving seats for the Scheduled Caste candidates. This was done in the State institutions for advanced education, professional and technical training. In government departments places were reserved to employ them. Constituencies were also reserved for the Scheduled Caste candidates to contest both for State and National elections. Thus by bringing the extreme sections of populace on par with the advanced sections it was hoped that greater social equality would follow. However, in the passing years these provisions which are in nature compensatory have failed to obliterate the inequality of caste in India's society. Prof Nandu Ram, presently holding the Dr. Ambedkar Chair at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi writes,

During the recent decades, specially after independence of the country, members of the stigmatized castes or ethnic communities have been striving for overcoming the stigma of their collectivity (caste and ethnic community) as well as of their own. Since they are engaged in looking for alternative self and collective or group (caste) identity, they have been making use of two courses of action, rather social processes, which have remained in vogue in Indian society: one, making use of achievements in secular domains like education, caste-free occupations or white collar jobs (economic) and power or authority. But all these three, in actuality, do not replace or obliterate their traditionally stigmatized group or caste identity.⁴⁴

This means that the burden to fight inequality has now been taken up by individuals and social groups in civil society. Therefore, what further should be done? Where shall we go from here? We will explore the answers to these queries in Dr. Ambedkar's

⁴² Dhananjay Keer. *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*. Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1992, p. 403/4.

⁴³ Guha. *India after Gandhi*: p. 239; and *Mandal Commission Report 1980*. Section 7.4. p. 29.

⁴⁴ Nandu Ram. *Encyclopaedia of Scheduled Castes in India*, Vol-1. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2007, p. xxix.

writings who wrestled with the problem of social inequality. His writings have become extremely influential. By familiarizing ourselves with his ideas we will be able to see in what respects it can also help us now. This leads us to the area of the relevance of studying Dr. Ambedkar in our times.

4. The Relevance of Dr. Ambedkar's views on Religion

What Dr. Ambedkar wrote on religion should not be assessed only by his social or political accomplishments; rather we should weigh the value of his insights, especially on religion's role for social reform. Sadly, what the social context was in his time solidly remains the same in the twenty first century. These are casteism, communalism and ethnocentrism which restrict the integration of varied people into the national community as equal citizens.⁴⁵ As a result of this exclusion of people on the ground of caste and religion, parallel societies are created on the imitation of caste where each group excludes all others. Women, nonetheless, suffer the same fate at all levels by being subordinated to men, and in this way due to their gender they are doubly disadvantaged. In this division the clean castes have reaped advantages more than the others. This visible disproportion is marked in the social, economic, cultural, political, occupational and educational standing of the *Shudra-Dalit* vis-à-vis the *Brahmin* castes. What Nandu Ram writes in a study conducted to determine the social status of Dalits in the rural south India is an example that demonstrates this point,

The practice of untouchability and other forms of discrimination in their day-to-day relations with people of the other castes and communities still exist in rural areas and small towns.... Not much qualitative and quantitative change is seen in the agrarian wage structure and consequently the greater number of younger generation of scheduled castes or Dalits has become urban oriented during all these years. At the social relational level, greater degree and amount of tension and conflict has emerged between the scheduled and non-scheduled castes as is evident from the large number of caste conflicts between them and the atrocities inflicted on the former in rural areas.⁴⁶

At the background of this excerpt lies the fact that Dalits have been forced to cultivate fields that are not theirs and do unhygienic work which the members of 'clean' castes do not. This has turned caste to be much more than a system of social segregation. It has become a web where occupation, status, labour, economics, residence, ritual and untouchability have become inseparably interlocked. All this is obvious in the

⁴⁵ In the Indian society there are three traits that exclude people. These are casteism, communalism and ethnocentrism. Casteism is the practice of caste specific rules and regulations which makes a caste-group distinct from all other groups in the society; communalism connotes rivalry among religious communities in a multi-religious society; ethnocentrism connotes introverted attitude of people that excludes people of other cultures from their ethnic orbit. A common feature of all these three is social exclusion especially in a pluralistic society.

⁴⁶ Nandu Ram. *Encyclopaedia of Scheduled Castes in India*, Vol-1, p. xxxiii.

exploitative practices of the landowners and capitalists who invariably belong to the clean castes. They neither pay them just wages nor do they share dividends from the profits they create from the cheap labour of Dalits. This problem is reinforced by religion which has endorsed the caste system. This has adversely affected millions of Dalit men and women in the subcontinent. The 2001 census of India reveals that the total population of the Scheduled Castes in the country (excluding the population of Mao Maram, Paomata and Purul sub-divisions of Senapati district of Manipur) is 166,635,700 which constitute 16.2% of the total Indian population.⁴⁷

The hold of the caste system on the minds of people arises from the worldviews entrenched in the Sanskrit scriptures since the times when the Rig Veda was composed i.e. *circa* 1200 B.C.E.⁴⁸ Religion's endorsement of caste has made the exploited Dalits submissive and unresponsive to challenge it in any lasting form. According to the Mandal Commission Report,

If religion was ever used as opium of the masses, it was done in India, where a small priest-class, by subtle process of conditioning the thinking of the vast majority of the people, hypnotized them for ages to accepting a role of servility with humility. As labourers, cultivators, craftsman, etc., Shudras were the main producers of social surplus. Their social labour was the life-blood of India's great civilization. Yet socially they were treated as out-castes; they had no right to private property; they carried the main burden of taxes, and the heaviest punishments were awarded to them for minor infringements of the social code. As their low caste status was tied to their birth, they toiled and suffered without any hope.⁴⁹

Dr. Ambedkar's response to religions from the perspective of social inequality makes this study relevant. To counter this social drawback many solutions have been offered. However, there is a difference in what the right wing nationalist offers and what Dr. Ambedkar offers. The former addresses the issue of untouchability but not inequality whereas Dr. Ambedkar primarily attacked inequality. In a nutshell his solutions for untouchability and caste system were compressed in the slogan equality, liberty and fraternity. But then a dilemma which remains unclear in Dr. Ambedkar's writings is this, does society's priority shape religion or does religion shape society? From where do values of justice and freedom emerge? Do they emerge from religion or from society? In Dr. Ambedkar's writings we see that on the one hand he contended that the French revolutionists got their slogan of equality, liberty and fraternity from religion, but on the other hand he held that justice and democracy i.e. community of equals,

⁴⁷ <censusindia.gov.in/census_And-You/Scheduled_Castes_And-Scheduled-Tribes.aspx> visited on June 6, 2012.

⁴⁸ Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty. *Hindu Myths*. Harmondsworth. England: Penguin Classics, 1976, p.17.

⁴⁹ Mandal Commission Report 1980. 'Social Backwardness and Caste'. Section 4.23, p. 21.

created a good religion. This dilemma haunts Dr. Ambedkar's readers, but we must keep in mind that his response to religion was chiefly against social inequality and untouchability generated by the caste system and sanctioned by religion.

5. Religion, Selfhood and Conversion

It is obvious from his writings that this restoration of the *selfhood* of Dalits necessitated their equality in society. In another place, Dr. Ambedkar expresses the same sentiments and used the word "reclamation of the human personality".⁵⁰ The force of these two phrases was the same. It is nevertheless admitted that the word '*selfhood*' appears as a new formulation in the middle of the nineteenth century. The dictionary rendering relates it to 'the quality by virtue of which one is oneself' or its synonym '*ipseity*' meaning personal identity and individuality are unhelpful.⁵¹ These renderings do not explain what this means for Dalits in India. A clearer meaning of *selfhood* is to understand it as personal dignity, esteem and confidence. Admittedly for the proper development of these aspects of human personality one needs adequate growth in knowledge, power and will. Clearly these are interior aspects of one's personality which the Dalits could never develop. We know that to develop these every human being needs education and social associations. In this line of thinking we may appreciate that Dr. Ambedkar's slogan: educate, organize and agitate, was apt for Dalits who had become degraded due to centuries of oppression.

In connection with dignity we may well raise the question of using the term 'Untouchable' for Dalits in case it becomes a hurdle for realizing one's *selfhood*. I agree with Simon Charsley⁵² that 'Untouchable' is an unfortunate label that connotes devaluation of human beings. I have accordingly preferred to use Dalit throughout this study, except in citations and when inevitable. For a more accurate understanding of Dr. Ambedkar we must recognize the broken condition of the Scheduled castes. We must underline the meaning of *Dalit*. It connotes being pounded by oppression.⁵³ Dalits need emancipation from this condition of brokenness. In this connection Dr. Ambedkar felt that none except Dalits themselves could recover their dignity. No one else will do this for them. For this they were to be armed both interiorly and exteriorly. Religion empowered them for the former and politics for the later.

⁵⁰ McPhee. *Road to Delhi* p. 240. The diary entry is as following: "My final words of advice to you are educate, agitate and organize, have faith in yourself. With justice on our side I do not see how we can lose our battle. For ours is a battle not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for the *reclamation of the human personality*". (emphasis is added).

⁵¹ New English Dictionary Vol. VIII. Henry Bradkey. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888.

⁵² Simon R. Charsley. 'Beyond Untouchability? Challenging the Primacy of the Untouchables-Caste Hindu Divide' in *Ambedkar, Dalits and Buddhism* (Edt). Nandu Ram. New Delhi: Manak Publications Pvt Ltd. 2008, p. 154.

⁵³ Zelliott *From Untouchable to Dalit*. p. vii.

Basically *selfhood* has to do with the question of one's identity, who are we?⁵⁴ The answer is controlled by two more questions, what do others think we are? And what we do believe to be true of ourselves? Whatever may be the answer to these questions, the essential thing was whether the answers added to one's dignity or degraded them. Now the problem with Dalit identity that deeply affected their *selfhood* was that they were being controlled on religious grounds to believe that they were degraded beings, a condition for which they themselves were to be blamed. The explanation of their degraded identity was offered in the doctrines of *karma* and *dharma*. Having accepted their degraded social status as the consequence of *karma* (deeds of *adharma* they had committed or of *dharma* which they might have omitted in the previous birth), the Dalits are laden with the baggage of shame. This cycle to name and to shame is vicious. Therefore it is important to break this cycle for emancipation. One way to change one's identity is to change one's name. Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that Dalits do change their names but he observed that the way they do this failed to restore their dignity. He wrote,

There is a fixed attitude towards 'Untouchables' which is determined by the stink which is imbedded in the name 'Untouchable'. People have no mind to go into the individual merits of each Untouchable no matter how meritorious he is. All untouchables realize this. There is a general attempt to call themselves by some other than the 'Untouchables'. The Chamars call themselves Ravidas or Jatavas. The Doms call themselves Shilpkars. The Pariahs call themselves Adi-dravidas, the Madigas call themselves Arundhataya, the Mahars call themselves Chokhmela or Somavanshi and the Bhangis call themselves Balmikis. All of them if away from their localities would call themselves Christians.⁵⁵

Dr. Ambedkar called this ineffective change of name 'protective discoloration' which often had failed to serve its purpose. So we may well ask what else could be done. His answer to this query was to convert to an egalitarian religion. Conversion in his view involved two things: one, changing allegiance to a new community of faith and two, changing interiorly. This was fundamental to redefining one's identity.⁵⁶ Attention should be *Drawn* to the fact that starting from *Yeola Declaration* he continuously for the next twenty years, advocated conversion of Dalits to an egalitarian religion. In this line of advocacy he underlined three reasons for Dalits to convert,

1. To end social isolation.
2. To remove inferiority complex.
3. To raise general social status.

⁵⁴ John C.B. Webster. *Religion and Dalit Liberation: An Examination of Perspective*. New Delhi. Manohar Publishers and Distributors. 2002, p.112.

⁵⁵ B.R. Ambedkar, 'Away From the Hindus' (1936), p. 419.

⁵⁶ Webster. *Religion and Dalit Liberation*. pp. 107-109.

The cure for social isolation was to join a religion where Dalits would be welcomed as equal members of the community. Such kinship would also extend security to Dalits in time of crisis, when other members would join in solidarity and support.

Inferiority complex, for Dr. Ambedkar, was a deep mental condition arising out of segregation, prejudice and hostility.⁵⁷ The remedy for this mental condition was conversion to another highlighted the role of religion to universalize human feelings, just like reason rationalizes human ideas.⁵⁸ When human will and emotions were projected and harmonized with similar feelings of other people universally, it encouraged hope and confidence in life's struggle. This was essential to cure the inferiority complex of Dalits.

As far as the alleviation of the general social status was concerned, Dr. Ambedkar advocated a change in name. As 'Untouchable' was a bad name with a stink, the strategy was to change it. But this was not to be a cosmetic change; rather the new name had to be from outside the Hindu fold, 'beyond its power of spoliation and degradation' he wrote.⁵⁹ This brings us back to the subject of conversion to repossess the *selfhood* which is where we had started our discussion of this section. So we see that in Dr. Ambedkar's thinking religion, *selfhood* and conversion were essentially interconnected. Change was needed to in all these three aspects for truly emancipating Dalits.

6. Aim and Contents of this Study

This study does not aim to produce Dr. Ambedkar's biography, but to bring out his theoretical approach to religion. By far the most detailed biography is by Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission* first published in 1954 and since then has been reprinted several times.⁶⁰ A drawback of Keer's work is his obvious disapproval of missionary enterprise to convert Dalits to Christianity⁶¹ which was not Dr. Ambedkar's view as such. In the year 2000 a feature film "Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar" directed by Jabbar Patel was released. It is a good movie based on his biography.⁶² As far as my

⁵⁷ B.R. Ambedkar, 'Away From the Hindus' (1936), pp. 413-419.

⁵⁸ B.R. Ambedkar, 'Away From the Hindus' (1936), p. 409.

⁵⁹ B.R. Ambedkar, 'Away From the Hindus' (1936), p. 420.

⁶⁰ Other biographical writings are as following: Dr. B.R. Ambedkar entry in Encyclopedia of Asian History (Editor Ainslee Embree) New York: Charles Scribners Sons. 1988; D.C. Ahir. *Life of Dr. Ambedkar*. Delhi: BR Publishing. 1990; Vasant Moon. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar* ((translated by Asha Damle) New Delhi: National Book Trust India, 2007; Nanak Chand Rattu. *Little Known Facts of Dr. Ambedkar*. New Delhi: Focus Impressions, 2001.

⁶¹ Keer's expresses his opinion about the missionary enterprise like this, 'The Christian missionaries fully exploited this situation. they took up the cause of the education of lower classes as also of the Untouchables; of course, with an ulterior motive, and began to disseminate education among them.' Cf. Dhananjay Keer. *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*. Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1992, p. 5.

⁶² This feature film was funded both by the central government's Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, and the State government of Maharashtra.

work is concerned, it focuses on Dr. Ambedkar's response to religions by assessing their worth. Although the issue of caste and untouchability are intertwined with religion, I focus on these only because it is unavoidable. My interest was not to study the caste system as such but religion. Curiously in India the religious practices of caste and untouchability are concurrent to the problem of social inequality. Other issues connected with religions are communal conflicts, nationalism, ethics, culture, politics, conversion, social order and *dharma*.⁶³

This study is divided into ten chapters. Beginning with this Introduction, Dr. Ambedkar's method of assessing religion is taken up exhaustively in chapter two. In this chapter we will see that his reductionist approach turns religion into a component of society. In this way he not only misses out on the breathtaking scope that religions offer to the world, but his limited view makes his assessment unfair from the standpoint of some religions. Subsequently chapters three to nine deal with his response to various religions. Here we will see that Dr. Ambedkar's assessment on religion was one sided, yet his assertion that religion transmits the basic values of human life which also helps to structure our society and are also used to maintain a status quo, is a valid point. The layout of this study is not meant to suggest that he dealt with each of these sequentially on a time-line. What is true, however, is that he did respond to each of these for different reasons at different times. The aim of my study is to bring out his struggle and dilemmas with religion with a degree of clarity. We can identify three milestones in his effort:

- The first milestone December 25, 1927: Burning of *Manusmriti*, the religious book of caste laws. From this time onward he wrote about religion as the cause for caste based inequality.⁶⁴
- The second milestone October 13, 1935: *Yeola* Declaration. At a conference of the Depressed Classes in Yeola town he declared his intention to convert to an egalitarian religion.⁶⁵
- The third milestone May 4, 1951: Foundation of Buddhist Society of India. He commenced compiling the life and teachings of Buddha in a book, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, which he composed in style of the gospels and was published posthumously.⁶⁶

⁶³ The Sanskrit word *dharma* connotes one's duty at one's stage of life and status in the caste system.

⁶⁴ Keer, Dr. *Ambedkar*. p. 101.

⁶⁵ Keer, Dr. *Ambedkar*. p. 252.

⁶⁶ It is Volume-11 in the series of Dr. *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*. Mumbai: 1992.

These milestones show the extent to which Dr. Ambedkar challenged the mighty power of the Indian culture—the caste system, which even the British in India had feared to touch.

His articles were mostly published after 1979.⁶⁷ This corpus constitutes the primary source published in twenty-one volumes under the title, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches* by the Education Department of the Government of Maharashtra State in India, totaling between 12,500 and 13,000 printed pages in the seventeen volumes of English only. The other three volumes i.e. eighteen to twenty are his writings in his first language Marathi and volume twenty one is a selection of facsimile of his hand written English manuscripts.

Each volume has been forwarded from the desk of the Minister of Higher Education and other Ministers of the State Government. The publication of each volume had been under a properly constituted committee of twenty four scholars appointed by the State Government. Dr. Vasant W. Moon in capacity of the Officer on Special Duty (OSD) was involved in this project as the compiler of most volumes. These were printed at the Government Press in Mumbai. The object of this publication was not only to compile Dr. Ambedkar's writings on variety of topics but to make these available to the reading population at every level of society at an affordable price. The publishing work has been going on since 1982 till the twenty-first volume was published in 2006. Moreover these volumes are a wealth of narratives, reports, speeches, interviews, schemes, proposals, ideas, press interviews and statements on a variety of topics that Dr. Ambedkar left with us.

Now we should be careful not to assume that his writings are exclusively or predominantly on religion. The fact is that the impressive corpus of what he wrote in this field, constitute only a part of his total writings in these volumes. In these twenty-one volumes all his articles were compiled not strictly in a chronological sequence. However it was not possible for the compilers and the OSD to determine the date of writing for many Articles. Mostly they have collected his articles under themes. This places some limit to get a full view of some discussions, but the year of writings can be worked out from the internal evidences of footnotes or the events he has referred to in those articles. Accordingly I have worked out some dates of his articles that I have used in this study yet knowing well that these are approximations.

This focus on Dr. Ambedkar's views on religion is of importance in itself. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, Dr. Ambedkar's engagement with religion has not been

⁶⁷ See title page of Volume-1 in the series of *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*. Mumbai: Education Department Government of Maharashtra, 1989.

dealt exhaustively in a single volume. The treatment of religion strewn in various books in piecemeal fashion is inadequate to do justice to his concern. I have listed some of these in the footnote.⁶⁸ In his own work, the subject of religion occurs in those articles which discuss the problem of caste system though some books are wholly on religion. For example in volume-1 of *Writings and Speeches* the first two articles, *Castes in India* (1916) and *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) are dedicated to discussion of Caste. Whereas Volume-4 and 11 are full length religious books titled *Riddles of Hinduism* (1956) and *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1956) which take up the problem of caste also. The insights on religion strewn in all these varied articles I have presented in an organized way in this study. Secondly, the application of the result of this study will break new grounds in the field of theology and religious studies with reference to society. The research will also be useful in the study of religions in India from Dalit perspective and challenge religions to review their role in the Indian context.

From what I have discussed, we can see Dr. Ambedkar in multiple roles. As a scholar he was an avid reader, researcher and a writer of many books. As a jurist he supervised the drafting the Indian Constitution⁶⁹ and as a statesman was responsible for including the Fundamental Rights for the Indian citizens in the Constitution of India.⁷⁰ These are but few instances of his varied contributions to show my point. This again affirms that his line of action was political which is evident in the methods he employed to accomplish his aims. He founded three political parties, the Independent Labour Party in 1936, the Scheduled Caste Federation in 1942 and the Republican Party in 1956, which has politicized the Dalits.⁷¹ Other political methods he used were of organizing rallies, public gatherings, protests, public speeches and participation in

⁶⁸ Here is a list of selected books that deal with Dr.. Ambedkar's Response to religions.

1. T.S.Wilkinson and M.M.Thomas. *Ambedkar and The Neo-Buddhist Movement*. Chennai: The Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society. Bangalore and The Christian Literature Society. 1972.
2. Dhananjay Keer. Dr. *Ambedkar: Life and Mission* Mumbai: Popular Prakashan.1992, pp. 266-284.
3. John C.B.Webster. *Religion and Dalit Liberation: An Examination of Perspective*: New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors.. 2002, pp. 35-74.
4. James Massey. Dr.. *B.R. Ambedkar: A Study in Just Society*. New Delhi: Centre for Dalit Studies & Manohar Publishers and Distributors. 2003, pp. 24-62.
5. Eleanor Zelliot. *Ambedkar's Conversion*. New Delhi: Critical Books. 2005.
6. Eleanor Zelliot. *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on Ambedkar Movement*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors. 2005, pp. 187-261.
7. J.A. David Onesimus. Dr. *Ambedkar's Critique towards Christian Dalit Liberation*. New Delhi: ISPCK.. 2008, pp. 5-38.
8. K. David Pandyan. Dr. *Ambedkar and the Dynamics of New-Buddhism*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House. 2009.

⁶⁹ Keer, Dr. *Ambedkar* p. 413.

⁷⁰ *The Constitution of India* Part-III. There are seven Fundamental Rights in the Indian Constitution: Right to Equality, Right to Freedom, Right against Exploitation, Right to Freedom to Religion, Cultural and Educational Rights and Right to Constitutional Remedies.

⁷¹ Zelliot. *From Untouchable to Dalit*. p. 70-71.

political processes, demonstrations, and conferences, publications of newspapers and journals, and even religious conversion. In some instances he strategically reversed his earlier positions on political demands.⁷² However he never deviated from his aim to use political strategies to reform religion, and to construct a just society. In all that he wrote on religion lay his mission to establish egalitarian society. It was this yearning that led him to assess various religions which he regarded as the foundation for social structures. The question before him was if religion was the foundation of society, then which one should he and his people adopt? But before we answer this question which will cover seven chapters of this study, we should first grasp his philosophy which he set out as the basis for theorizing religion in the context of India.

⁷² Zelliott gives interesting details about this. She writes about Dr. Ambedkar that, 'At this Nagpur conference shortly before he left for London, Ambedkar stated that he would be satisfied with joint electorates provide that there was adult franchise and reserved seats. Earlier, in 1919, he had asked for separate electorates, as did Jains, Marahas, Lingayats, Marwaris and a number of other groups in a sort of separate electorate fever, but in 1928, before the Simon Commission, he reversed his position. There he used the argument against separate electorates which Gandhi was later to use against him—that this would result in increased disunity'. Cf. Zelliott. *From Untouchable to Dalit*. p. 103.

Chapter II

Dr. Ambedkar's Dilemma with Religion

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956) was disturbed by the behaviour of his coreligionists towards the untouchables. This being his own experience, he reflected on this social problem of untouchability and segregation i.e. revulsion and rejection of the Dalits as inferior and unfit for human association by the 'clean' castes. He held that social change was possible by changing people's behaviour, and that people's behaviour would change if they changed their thinking. He drew a line under religion to emphasize that it was wholly responsible for shaping people's thinking. Therefore, religions needed to be accessed. In doing so he was also searching of a possible home into which he would lead his people.

For this assessment he developed a theory of religion and society. He defined religion as propounding the *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* i.e. a design sacralized for social order. Accordingly, the first purpose of religion was to offer a design to organize the society and the second was to sanctify whatever was vital for cohesion of society. Therefore, a religion needed to be scrutinized if it offered a just social design. Justice for Dr Ambedkar was synonymous with equality, liberty and fraternity. Unlike the French, Dr Ambedkar always placed equality first in this slogan and underscored its religious roots.

Having thus reduced the relevance of religion to social utility he started his assessment of each religion. His aim was to explore two things; one, the roots of social inequality and two, the central concern of society. Tracing the evolution of religion and society he brought out two norms for assessing the contemporary religions, namely, *utility* and *justice*. He pointed out that in the three phases of society's evolution—primal, antique and modern—religion had distinct concerns. These were to protect life, society and individual. The former two were he valued for *utility* and the latter for *justice*. Religion's *utility* for preserving life and society was important for the survival of the human species but the protection of individual's interest was important to make him/her a free and equal being. This was justice. These then were the norms that Dr Ambedkar would employ for assessing the *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* of religions. Admittedly, there was no obvious role for deity in his theory of religion. This in his view was rational. Nevertheless, religions when found faltering needed to be reformed on this rational principle so that their ideal scheme for society's governance would be just and useful for the people i.e. one that would promote egalitarianism, freedom and kinship. Once a religion was reformed the reordering of society would be easier. This

was his basic principle for social change. All the rest which was esoteric and metaphysical was superfluous.

Dr Ambedkar's line of reasoning is both interesting and problematic. The problem is the dilemma between *utility* and *justice*. There would be situations where the collective advantage for society – *utility* – would not be in the interest of an individual and vice versa. Dr Ambedkar did not really see this drawback in his argument. He also had no explanation for resistance of the adherents to reform their religious worldviews to their own advantage even by the force of law. One example is the Hindu Code Bill which failed in the Indian parliament in 1951. His way to transcend this dilemma was to intellectually articulate his ideas hoping that those who read his books would be persuaded by his arguments to reform religion and society.

Now let us return to our discussion on assessment of religions. The method to assess religion was to cull out its sacred design for social order by scrutinizing its rituals, not its doctrines. What did the ritual actually intended to do? He pointed out that the rituals indicated what kind of scheme was being sanctified for the social order? It could be unjust or just i.e. hierarchical or egalitarian. Justice meant two things for Dr Ambedkar. Firstly, it meant that social order should ensure that all people to enjoy freedom, equality and intermingling. Secondly, it meant that unequal people should not be treated equally under the law. Therefore, Dalits who were disadvantaged needed to be compensated. This meant that the individuals were protected. This is in line with Dr Ambedkar's reasoning that what was good for the individual was also good for the society. In this way the dilemma of justices versus utility was transcended. In Dr Ambedkar's thinking if the laws of a religious tradition contradicted this principle of *justice* and *utility* they had to be changed. In his view nothing was eternally fixed in a religious tradition except to protect life, society and individual.

At this point we must admit our findings. These are three, firstly that the conflict of norms create dilemma; secondly, religious tradition is a strong basis of social inequality; and thirdly, that it is difficult to reorder society through the agency of religion alone. Keeping this predicament in mind let us proceed to see one more aspect of Dr Ambedkar's analysis of religion. Dr Ambedkar divided the religious traditions into two regimes: the *religion of rules* and the *religion of principles*. He pointed out that under rules, people acted without thinking whereas with principles as their guide people had to think about why and how they were to act. Therefore, their actions had to be responsible acts. We can now concisely state Dr Ambedkar's line of thinking.

Society is a given fact where human beings are born and where they live till they die. The social nature of human beings and their interdependence to meet their needs make society an unavoidable fact. But inevitably, over a span of time, it becomes

socially and economically unequal giving rise to classes and castes based on economy, occupation, gender, language, ethnicity and colour. Here some people gain dominance and others are subjugated. This injustice of inequality cause two things: the subjugation of the powerless as well as the lawlessness of the powerful. We may also note that the majority makes law so they are the masters of the law and can make them to suit their own advantages which may perpetuate inequality oppression, rejection, exploitation and exclusion.

Religion, which originally in the primal phase started as ritualized actions of socially useful roles for human beings, also changes tracks to support and sanctify unjust social order of its day. Therefore, religion needs to be assessed and reformed. This in turn will help to change the thinking of the people and to facilitate to establish social righteousness. Here the importance of religion should not be underestimated for two reasons: first, that it has the power to let loose or to rein in the behaviour of the majority. This may adversely or favourably affect the minorities of a society; and second, that it gives a blueprint for structuring society, which Dr Ambedkar called as the *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance*. This is a difficult but crucial point in Dr Ambedkar's thinking on religion, because the two things – inspiration, as well as, the practical extension of its ideals in law – have to be held together. For the State, the issue of religious plurality in the society adds to this problem of differentiation by giving rise to multiple collectivities in one society i.e. communitarianism. Understandably if a society were to be established on Dr Ambedkar's ideals, it would not tolerate alternative religions which may differ in their ideals.

A religion's blue print for the social order should be assessed on the standard of reason and human rights. The reason being that the law does not affect the human heart and conscience, e.g. it is the human heart, not the law, which obliges us to share our goods with the poor. Having assessed various religions, Dr Ambedkar found that it was very difficult to reform them. Here a way out was to establish a single religious system based on entirely his ideals. In order to undertake the exercise of assessing a religion, Dr Ambedkar unveiled the foundational roots of religion's advancement over several millennia. These, as we have discussed earlier, were three, namely, conserving life, preserving society and protecting individual. He reduced these to *utility* and *justice* that constituted the basis of religion to govern society.

A religion that sanctified *utility* and *justice*, instead of regarding the supernatural, as normative was *rational*. It would resist propagating superstitions. A religion, therefore, that sanctified what was *useful*, *just* and *rational*, offered a righteous blueprint for a social order and for regulating behaviour of the people. It does this by making morality, instead of the law, sacred. Hence, a religion that can stand this test should be

established in a society. Here Dr Ambedkar misses the big point of religious pluralism in society. Understandably so because as a statesman with an agenda for the emancipation of Dalits, he saw difficulties in uniting and organizing them on democratic principles of freedom and equality.

A society established on religion's intention to make people free and equal would constitute a just society. This aspect of *utility* of religion for society was tantamount to justice and righteousness. The former involved equal treatment of all people under the law and the latter involved solidarity, reciprocal responsibility and mutual care among people in a society. From this aspect of justice and righteousness Dr Ambedkar had figured out, as we have discussed earlier, that the slogan of the French Revolutionists – liberty, equality and fraternity – in the end had religious roots.

It is essential that a State be established to make laws for the society and execute them or to punish those who break them. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the State to ensure that the people not only live peaceably in society, but also that the interests of individuals are protected. In this way the State comes mid-way of seeing society as closed home, on the one hand and on the other, the individuals as free beings. Here we should highlight Dr Ambedkar's insight that the rules of society are authorized by religion. However, all societies become unjust and differentiate into unequal factions and so do the religions especially when they sanctify unjust norms and worldviews. Therefore there arises a need to assess and reassess our religion. When this assessment succeeds to re-establish a righteous religion, then the above cycle would repeat itself.

Dr Ambedkar believed that religion had the authority to sanctify, e.g. it had earlier sanctified the dharma, the dhamma and the gospel. This demonstrated the fact that by doing this it makes a philosophy or an ideology or a theology sacred. Once sanctified, the social order, moral order and the worldview propounded by that philosophy or ideology or theology becomes sacred. Having reached this point, a religion propounds what it has accepted as sacred in an indisputable fashion. The drawback is that it can advocate social inequality as a sacred order; here the caste system was a case in point. To counter this, every religion, in Dr Ambedkar's view, needed to be tested on the anvil of justice. But as we have already pointed out that this method was too simple to analyze the complexity of religion. Let us now study Dr Ambedkar's assessment of various religions in India with my comments below.

Chapter III

Response to Primal Religions

In a positive sense primal refers to the original instincts interiorly felt by every person. These may be the feeling of the uncanny, wonder and awe,⁷³ which are primal but not primitive as such.⁷⁴ Primal Religion attended to these interiorly felt needs in human beings often exhibited in cries of anguish and anxiety and at the same time called for assistance through rituals.⁷⁵ Dr. Ambedkar, however, made no such distinctions between personal and social aspects of Primal Religion. His concern was to identify the scheme of governance that the Primal Religion offered for organizing society, and to assess its relevance to study religion in the modern times. He found that the Primary Religion did not offer a fully developed scheme as such; rather, it made conservation of life its chief interest in the primitive society and turned it into a sacred norm. This made religion useful for the society in its primal stages. From this Dr. Ambedkar concluded that *utility* was a fundamental intention of an authentic religion. Accordingly the authenticity of a religion, in his view, could be assessed on the anvil of its utility i.e. by its capacity to conserve life. Although Dr. Ambedkar highlighted utility as a norm to assess religion, he did not apply it to test the Primal Religion of modern India. It was not worth the effort because the Primal Religions were fossilized forms of animistic practices of primeval society.

Beside this, Dr. Ambedkar studied the root of untouchability in the earliest forms of society. Among the *adivasis* and indigenous tribes all over the world whatever was perceived as a threat to social cohesion and harmful to human life was treated with caution. Such a person or an article was regarded as contaminated. The caution was normally segregation from the rest of the community. Here Dr Ambedkar had pointed out that in the tribes although the contaminated person or article was untouchable, this state was only temporary. The rituals could restore a person by ridding him/her of contamination.

It must be accepted that Primal Religion could not help the *Adivasi* communities to cope with the modernity that besets them on all sides. Their communitarian worldview, despite its fine lessons, has been outdated by laws which aim to protect private properties as a legitimate right of its owners. Their pre-literary state is a handicap in the modern world where the systems depend on literacy. Therefore, as Fernando contends that to update their worldview the *adivasi* communities will convert to another religion

⁷³ Miller and Schwartzman. *Our Religion and Our Neighbors*, p. 15.

⁷⁴ Frykenberg. *Christianity in India*, p.10.

⁷⁵ Frykenberg. *Christianity in India*, p.10.

and their Primal Religion of oral forms will be subsumed into the new religions they adopt.⁷⁶ Most unacceptable to Dr. Ambedkar would be the caste traits assimilated by the earliest forms of communities in India. This is attested in the research projects undertaken in more recent times. For instance Nag's report reveals practices of untouchability observed by the *Oraon* tribe of Jharkhand against other tribal groups.⁷⁷ Admittedly Dr. Ambedkar did not find Primal Religion useful for Dalits except for expounding his hypothesises. The Primal Religions were Religions-of-Rules, albeit, in a primitive way. Dr Ambedkar saw limited traces of untouchability in the tribal practices. It was observed around a person deemed to be contaminated till the rituals were performed to receive him/her back into their society. In as much as the Primal Religions were useful to study the nature of the primitive society, these were incapable to help the people move into modernity.

He therefore turned to the religions of scriptures which had made their impact on the modern society. The question before him was this; if Primal Religion was obsolete what other suitable options were there for Dalits? To answer this query we will start our investigation of Dr. Ambedkar's response beginning with the Hindus.

⁷⁶ Leonard Fernando and G.Gispert-Sauch. *Op Cit.*, 2004, p. 208.

⁷⁷ Soumen Nag. The Tribal Population Pattern in Dooarg (North Bengal) in *Journey with the Tribals*. N.B. Mitra (ed.). Durgapur: Tribal Research Centre, 2006, p. 134.

Chapter IV

Response to Hindus

Dr. Ambedkar's response to Hindus, the tradition in which he was brought up, was ambiguous. Although he declared his intention to convert to another religion yet he did not leave its fold till the last year of his life. In 1936 with one stroke of his pen he revealed his thoughtfulness for Hindus. He wrote, "I feel I have some responsibility towards the future of Hindu culture and civilization".⁷⁸ It is clear that his disappointment with his co-religionists did not entirely wean him away from Hinduism. In his speech *Annihilation of Caste* he wrote to those who cared a very moving conclusion. His appeal to them was to pioneer reform on the egalitarian lines in Hindu society.⁷⁹

You must make your efforts to uproot caste, if not in my way, then in your own way. I am sorry; I will not be with you. I have decided to change. ... But even when I am gone out of your fold, I will watch your movement with active sympathy and you will have my assistance for what it may be worth. Yours is a national cause. ... good bye and good wishes for your success.⁸⁰

This gentle tone we come across for none except for Christians in his writings. He was aware of the progress that Hinduism had made over a long period of its evolution, *ahimsa* being one such example of which he was convinced. What he vehemently opposed was its consistent endorsement of the caste system, which had permanently fragmented the Hindu community into unequal segments. This had made the Hindus weaker whereas he wanted them to be modern and humane. The result of this unequally divided Hindu society was endless suffering of the Dalits—emotional and physical, economic and intellectual. Added to this was the atrocious untouchability practiced by people of the privileged castes against Dalits to ensure the protection of their purity. It is in this light that we need to assess Dr. Ambedkar's critique of Hinduism.

It is clear from our discussion above that Dr. Ambedkar was convinced that the behaviour of people was determined by the social order. In turn the social order i.e. the *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* was founded on religious worldviews—egalitarian or hierarchical. In the case of the Hindus, they were unfriendly to their co-religionists of scheduled castes. The reason for this behaviour was the unequal society which had been

⁷⁸ B.R. Ambedkar. 'Conversion Movements Sans Selfish Motive' (1936) idem *Writing and Speeches* Vol.17. Part-1. Mumbai, 2003, p. 253.

⁷⁹ In this case it was the *Jat-Pat Todak Mandal* was a social reform movement in Lahore against caste system that had invited Dr. Ambedkar to deliver a speech in its 1936 Annual Conference. However, after seeing the content of the speech, they developed cold feet and withdrew their invitation for Dr. Ambedkar to deliver this speech.

⁸⁰ B.R. Ambedkar. 'Annihilation of Caste' (1936), p. 80.

established on the system of caste. It gave rise to the practice of untouchability. This system was approved by the Hindu scripture and established by its *dharma*. The drawback in Dr. Ambedkar's critique was his failure to appreciate the inherent potential of Hinduism to reform itself. One needs to be alert to spot this potential as it kept cropping up throughout Dr. Ambedkar's writings. However, he seems to be unaware of this greatness of his religion.

The Hindus had the drawback of the caste system which created social stratification. This was propounded the *dharma* which had made it to be a Religion-of-Rules. According to the rule of *dharma*, the society had to be ordered into four castes. Starting with the Brahmin-priest, the castes were placed in a descending order of purity i.e. the *kshatiya*-warrior, the *vaishya*-trader, the *shudra*-servant and the rest were casted out from the caste system as untouchables who were unclean. The caste system was sanctified as the *dharma*. Consequently people suffered the consequences of inequality. It caused isolation, discrimination and oppression. The people who experienced brokenness in excessive ways were Dalits.

Of what he had experienced Dr. Ambedkar had realized that at its best the Hindu *dharma* was beneficial only for few! Its *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* was the *varnashrama dharma* i.e. caste-cum-stage scheme. In his view this had disenfranchised Dalits by denying them equality and freedom. The scheme was unjust. Consequently this made it unfit for Dalits. Despite his advice for reforming Hinduism, the scope for the restoration of *selfhood* of Dalits within it was bleak. Even the propagation of the new alternative *dharma* would take a very long time to permeate the consciousness of Hindus across India. The question now before Dr. Ambedkar was, if not Hinduism then what was the other option for Dalits?

Chapter V

Response to Muslims

Dr. Ambedkar wrote more about Muslims than on Islam. This is understandable as he was interested in the social aspect of religion. Yet it is difficult from his writings to conclude⁸¹ as Ahmed Akbar, a Cambridge scholar, does that Dr. Ambedkar seriously considered converting to Islam.⁸² What we have is an exhaustive study on the proposal of Pakistan in his book *Pakistan or the Partition of India*.⁸³ In this Dr. Ambedkar had exhaustively reflected on the social makeup of the Indian Muslims,⁸⁴ which, for our purpose is a rich source to garner his insights. This study aims to explore Dr. Ambedkar's views about the Muslims. Undoubtedly Islam upholds justice but what sort of home did the Indian Muslim community offer to Dalits? Could it help them to regain their *selfhood*?

Dr. Ambedkar assessed the Muslim community to help them and others know their social faults. If, on the one hand, he was interested to estimate the value of Islam as a religion, then on the other, he was also interested to assess the condition of Dalits in the Muslim fold. One thing that certainly raised Dr. Ambedkar's disapproval was the replication of casteist practices by Indian Muslims. Despite their religious ideal of egalitarianism they did not treat their Dalit coreligionists with equality and friendship. For example as he found in Bengal their community was vertically divided as *ashraf*, *ajlaf* and *arzal*. These sections corresponded to the caste system allowing limited intermixing among them. The Islamic tradition, under the injunction of *Sharia* or the religious law, on the one hand, and the caste system on the other, was a Religion-of-Rules. Consequently people suffered social stagnation.

This was not inspired by Islam and had resulted in unequal treatment of their coreligionists. Earlier in 1935 his observation of the reason why despite the teachings of Islam which does not create the sense of high and low, its adherents did treat the Dalits with contempt was out of the fear that if they treated them as equals the Hindus of

⁸¹ This argument needs to be understood in the light of what Paradkar writes, 'After the 1935 Yeola resolution to quit Hinduism, Muslim leaders welcomed Ambedkar to join Islam. A rumor had once spread that Ambedkar was to join Islam. But Ambedkar denied this. Indian Muslims, he felt, did not take to social reorganization, and were therefore unlike the progressive Muslims under Kemal Pasha of Turkey'. B.A.M. Paradkar. *The Religious Quest of Ambedkar*. Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1972, p. 52

⁸² S. Ahmed Akbar. *Jinnah, Pakistan and Islamic Identity: The Search for Saladin*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 105.

⁸³ Dr. B.R Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940) idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol. 8. Mumbai: 1990, p. 7. This book is not theological in nature as such; rather it is downright political. It is actually a report of the Committee which under the Chairmanship of Dr. Ambedkar was appointed by the Independent Labour Party to study the question of Pakistan

⁸⁴ B.R. Ambedkar. 'Pakistan or the Partition of India' (1940), p. 5.

dominant castes in turn might treat them as low. His conclusion, therefore, that 'Muslims also follow the Untouchability like Hindus'⁸⁵ indicated that Islam, like Hinduism, had dropped from his list of consideration.

Keeping in view of that Dr. Ambedkar had rejected the option of Islam; where else could he suggest his people to turn?

⁸⁵B.R.Ambedkar. 'What Way Emancipation' (1936), *Idem Writings and Speeches* Vol-17 Part-III., 2003, p.126.

Chapter VI

Response to Christians

On January 5, 1938 at a Christian gathering at Sholapur, Dr. Ambedkar said, "I have had a great impact on my mind of two great personalities, Buddha and Christ. I want a religion which could teach us to practice equality, fraternity and liberty".⁸⁶ His interest in Christianity has been attested by the Revd Ian Charles Weathrall, who recalls his reserved nature.⁸⁷ Weathrall was the vicar of St James's Church, Delhi, at that time. Among other Christians whom Dr. Ambedkar had personally known were Waskom Pickett, a Methodist Bishop, who had said that Dr. Ambedkar twice asked him for baptism, Bishop Samuel Azariah of Dornakal, Ms Mildred Drescher an American Methodist missionary and Lady Fanny Fitzgerald in London with whom he shared his insights on Biblical passages.⁸⁸ He must have known other Christians like Raja Maharaj Singh, the first governor of Bombay (now Mumbai) in free India; Dr. John Matthai, a member in the first Cabinet Ministers of Nehru (the first Indian Prime Minister) and Dr. H.C. Mookerjee who was the Vice-President of the Constituent Assembly which drafted the Constitution of India.⁸⁹ Although Dr. Ambedkar sternly noted the disinterest of Indian Christians to fight social injustice,⁹⁰ the impact of Christianity on him was so great that throughout the volumes of his works he cited examples from the Christian world.⁹¹ Yet he was uncertain about them. On the one hand, he admired their religion,

⁸⁶ Vasant Moon. *Dr. Babsaheb Ambedkar*. New Delhi, National Book Trust, India, 2007, p. 122.

⁸⁷ For instance, in the winter of December 1952 and January 1953 Dr. Ambedkar made several visits to the Revd Ian Charles Weathrall. Dr. Ambedkar could do this as his residence at Alipur Road Delhi was close to the Church of St James at Kashmere Gate Delhi. Despite the Vicar's advice for the alternative Proposed Prayer Book, he insisted in reading the 1662 Prayer Book that contained the 39-Articles of Faith (Anglican). He used to read it in the Lady Chapel of the Church and sometimes sitting in his car. Revd I.C. Weathrall felt that by that time Dr. Ambedkar had already dropped the idea of considering Christianity as a possible home for Dalits. I was told this verbally by Revd Weathrall on 29th March 2008 at his residence i.e. the Brotherhood House, 7-Court Lane, Rustamji Sehgal Marg, Delhi -54.

⁸⁸ The references to these people are strewn in many books. Some of these references that I used are from the following books: Stephen Neill. *Men of Unity*. London: SCM Press. 1960, p. 57; Arthur G. McPhee. *Road to Delhi: Bishop J Waskom Pickett Remembered 1890-1981*. Bangalore: SAIACS Press, 2005, p. 240-247; Nanak Chand Rattu *Little Known Facets of Dr. Ambedkar*. Focus Impressions, 2001, pp 124-152.

⁸⁹ Jack C. Winslow. *The Eyelids of the Dawn: Memories, Reflections and Hopes*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1954, p. 123.

⁹⁰ Vasant Moon. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar* (Translated by Asha Damle) New Delhi: National Book Trust of India, 2007, p. 122.

⁹¹ In his speech to the first Constituent Assembly of India in 1949 as Dr. Ambedkar presented the Draft Constitution for India he cited a record of a discussion of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States of America whether they could pray for the nation. This citation of the record was this: 'Some years ago the American Protestant Episcopal Church was occupied at its triennial convention in revising its liturgy. It was thought desirable to introduce among the short sentence prayers a prayer for the whole people, and an eminent New England divine proposed the words, "O Lord, bless our nation". Accepted one afternoon on the spur of the moment, the sentence was brought up next day for reconsideration, when so many objections were raised by the laity to the word 'nation' as importing too definite a recognition of national unity, that it was dropped and instead there were adopted the

but on the other, he criticized their society and doctrines. In his reflections he fluctuates from sympathy and antipathy for Christians. Perhaps one way for a reader to steer through this ambiguity is to juxtapose his stand against caste with egalitarianism of Christianity. He refused to support Indian Christians for their compromise on social equality. It is this tension which comes through in his articles.

With this in mind Dr. Ambedkar reflected on the future of the Christians after India's independence from the British rule. His concern was whether Christianity would play any significant social role for restoring the *selfhood* of Dalits in the future or whether it would be reduced by the socially dominant people to insignificance as a vestige of British imperialism. The anchor of his assessment fell on the second possibility. The struggle of Christians to shed off their image as adopters of a foreign religion is evident in many places in Dr. Ambedkar's writings. Here a retort of an Indian Christian to Mahatma Gandhi reminding him that Indian Christians too were patriotic and keen on the affairs of their country like their compatriots, is a case in point.

The first (evidence) is from an Indian Christian to Mr. Gandhi and published in the *Young India*, August 25, 1921. This is what it says: "I am sorry to say that you do not take us Indian Christians as the people of India, as I have seen many times *Young India* mentioning Musalmaans, Hindus, Sikhs, etc., but omitting the Christians. I should like you to believe that we Indian Christians are also people in India, and take much interest in India's own affairs".⁹²

This response shows that the Indian Christians felt alienated in their country. In this connection Dr. Ambedkar's response was not clear. It is naive to say that Dr. Ambedkar was attracted to Christianity but not to Christians. The fact is that he was ambiguous. He felt simultaneously repelled and attracted both by this religion and to its adherents. But this was not something for which Dr. Ambedkar would have apologized. He appreciated the Christian values of equality, freedom and kinship. Free from the tradition of religious legalism Christianity was a Religion-of-Principles. However, despite its ideals of equality, freedom and fellowship the Indian Christians needed respite from the brutality of casteist practices within their community. Moreover it was politically weak and numerically insignificant in India. In places when he unfavourably commented, it was strictly on the lines of what he understood a good religion to be. For instance he believed that a good religion should be just and rational. For that reason he

words 'O Lord, bless these United States'. Dr. Ambedkar observed that 'there was so little solidarity in the U.S.A. at the time when this incident occurred that the people of America did not think that they were a nation. If the people of United States could not feel that they were a nation', Dr. Ambedkar mused, 'how difficult it is for Indians to think that they are a nation'. Cf. B.R. Ambedkar. 'Closing Speech in the First Constituent Assembly of India' in *Great Speeches of Modern India* (Editor: Rudrangshu Mukherjee), New Delhi: Random House, 2007, p. 219.

⁹² B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Condition of the Convert' (1937), idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-5. Mumbai: 1989, p. 474.

could not appreciate Christ's divinity.⁹³ This only shows that it is difficult for us to put him neatly in a box.

We have earlier studied his views on the unsuitability of Christianity for Dalits, namely—social, political and economic inadequacies. Being powerlessness in these areas made them incapable to negotiate justice. For Dr. Ambedkar these were great drawbacks of the Christian community. He reasoned that a disjointed community would be incapable to mobilize the broken people to demand civil liberties for themselves which would enable them to repossess their *selfhood*. The question once again before Dr. Ambedkar was this, if Christianity was unsuitable for the Dalits then what was the other option?

⁹³ B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha and His Dhamma' (1956), p. 215.

Chapter VII

Response to Sikhs

Despite Dr. Ambedkar's declaration of 13th October 1935 at a Conference at Yeola to convert to an egalitarian religion, he did not state what religion he, along with his community, were going to adopt.⁹⁴ In response to this, some religious leaders approached Dr. Ambedkar. One among these was Sardar Dalip Singh Doabia, Vice-President of the Golden Temple Managing Committee. In his telegram to Dr. Ambedkar he wrote that, "The Sikh religion is monotheistic and all-loving and provides for equal treatment of all its adherents."⁹⁵ Obviously this was an idealistic picture. Perhaps it was true that the Sikhs had accepted strict equality at the time when their religion was born. The obvious evidence of this is the tradition of *langar* or the community meal. But it soon became clear to Dr. Ambedkar that there were serious difficulties in the contemporary Sikh tradition. Despite his desire to assimilate the *Mahars* into an egalitarian and influential community he knew that converting to a religion merely because it had an egalitarian message was being naive.⁹⁶ He needed to give serious thought to the Sikh tradition if he were to adopt it along with his people.

We shall consider whether to join it or not just as we may consider whether or not to join any other sect, but such a sect must be of a living religion... I think that the Harijan community should be completely absorbed into some powerful community. It has decided not to join the Arya Samaj. We shall consider the question of joining the Sikh religion.⁹⁷

So here we can see Dr. Ambedkar's expectations of a religion suitable for Dalits. In his view Dalits had to be assimilated in a religion where social equality matched with other features like being influential, contemporaneous and commanding a global adherence. After the *Yeola* declaration, Dr. Ambedkar with a view to convert looked seriously to Sikhism.⁹⁸ A reason for preferring Sikhism was that it was an indigenous religion. His presence in the Sikh *bhajan* on January 13, 1936 and in a Sikh Mission Conference in mid April 1956 indicates this.⁹⁹ Though in writing he left very little of his thoughts on Sikhism, it is nonetheless obvious from what the evidence suggests that he took definite steps to assess and weigh this alternative before taking any decision.

⁹⁴ Moon. Dr. *Babasaheb Ambedkar*. p. 98.

⁹⁵ Paradkar. B.A.M. 'The Religious Quest of Ambedkar' in *Ambedkar and the Neo-Buddhist Movement*. T.S. Wilkinson and M.M.Thomas (eds). MaDr.as: Christian Literature Society, 1972, p.55.

⁹⁶ B.R. Ambedkar. 'Remove the Basis of 'Smriti' Religion' (1935), p. 237.

⁹⁷ B.R. Ambedkar. 'Remove the Basis of 'Smriti' Religion' (1935) Idem, p. 237. This is from the gist of an interview Dr. Ambedkar had with the Nasik Progressive Hindus at a meeting held on October 26, 1935.

⁹⁸ Moon. Dr. *Babasaheb Ambedkar*. p. 99.

⁹⁹ K. David Pandyan. Dr.. *B.R. Ambedkar and The Dynamics of Neo-Buddhism*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2009, p. 90.

If on the one hand Dr. Ambedkar appreciated the suitability of Sikhism to address the concerns of Dalits, then on the other, he found that their community was deficient in their religious ideal of egalitarianism. Although Sikhism was a Religion-of-Principles the Sikhs were affected by the caste system. For instance the status of the Ramdasi communities, who were faithful Sikhs but were classified as Scheduled Caste, was a glaring example of unequal social distinctions among them. Equality in the presence of *Granth Sahib* or the holy book, kinship in *Sangat* or fellowship and fraternity in *langar* or common meals were merely ritualized activities whereas the actual reports of tyranny committed against the Scheduled Castes who had arrived from Pakistan at the partition of India in 1947 by their *Jat* Sikh coreligionists took him in dismay.¹⁰⁰

Besides some Sikh leaders were opposed to welcome a large bulk of Dalits into the Sikh fold. This must have greatly disappointed Dr. Ambedkar which explains the abrupt break in his engagement with the Sikhs leaving his response to them incomplete. It is, therefore, understandable that despite Sikhism's indigenous origin, its well organized community and well formed political front, Dr. Ambedkar did not feel wholly welcomed into it. In this period he had rediscovered Buddhism in a concrete way to which he had been introduced in his younger days but remarkably there was a drawing closer to the Bible too! Of his rediscovery of Buddhism we will discuss in the last chapter. But the query before us is this, what kind of Buddhism would it be?

¹⁰⁰ Dr. Babasaheb Source Material Vol-1. 1982 Pg.349 cited in Michael S.M. *Dalit's Encounter with Christianity: A Case Study of Mahars in Maharashtra*. New Delhi: ISPCK, 2010, p.140.

Chapter VIII

Response to Jews

A remarkable difference in Dr. Ambedkar's treatment of Judaism was that he never criticized it in the way he did the adherents of other religions. Instead he was interested to observe the social order that at that time was being created in Israel, a new State in Palestine.¹⁰¹ In 1941 Bombay Sentinel, a monthly magazine published his article "Moses and His Significance".¹⁰² Among those with whom he discussed stories of the Hebrew Bible, was Mrs. Fanny Fitzgerald,¹⁰³ otherwise known as lady "F" to whom he also had dedicated a book.¹⁰⁴ We find that his references to Judaism and Jews are sparse. Yet they constitute more material in his writings than what he wrote on the Sikhs. Interestingly his references to the Jewish religion had a purpose. It was aimed to explore the traits of an authentic religion in line with his theory of religion which we have studied earlier in chapter two.

Admittedly for him Judaism was an archetypal religion of an antique society. This is in line with what we had earlier studied in Dr. Ambedkar's theory of religion.¹⁰⁵ Judaism being the earliest positive religion i.e. one with a founder was significant to lend support to his hypothesis on religion. On the basis of this I have pointed out that from his perspective Judaism stood uniquely among other religions. For him it was a bridge between a religion of savage society and civilized society. We have also considered that it has made the required shifts to modernity in the way Dr. Ambedkar had suggested in his *ten-shifts hypothesis* and norms of *utility* and *justice*.

They were an interesting and an ancient community in India. Despite being a Religion-of-Rules it had adapted itself to the modern society. In the Indian context it was divided up into caste-like unequal community of *gora* (white) and *kala* (black) Jews respectively. Although Dr Ambedkar was interested in the Jewish scripture to establish some aspects of his theory of religion, it was not a religion to which he had ever contemplated to convert. In fact after assessing various Indian religions he found none of them were suitable for Dalits.

It may well be that in his reading of the Bible he saw this and even got insights to construct his theory of religion. In this sense following the line of Dr. Ambedkar's reasoning one can say that Judaism is an egalitarian religion and keeps the protection of

¹⁰¹ B.R. Ambedkar. 'Moses and His Significance' (1941), idem 'Dr. Ambedkar and the Jewish People' *Writings and Speeches* Vol-17 Part-I. Mumbai, 2003, p. 342.

¹⁰² B.R. Ambedkar. 'Moses and His Significance' (1941), p. 342.

¹⁰³ Nanak Chand Rattu. *Little Known Facets of Dr. Ambedkar*. New Delhi: Focus Impressions, 2001, pp. 125, 139.

¹⁰⁴ B.R. Ambedkar. 'What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables' (1945), The Dedication Page.

¹⁰⁵ See Chapter Two of this study 'Dr. Ambedkar's Dilemmas with Religion'.

individuals on priority in its *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance*. In other words it is focused on justice. Yet in the Indian context it had the Drawback of practicing discrimination within its community. By implication not all converts may have been welcomed into its fold. Along with this, its lack of political ambition due to their ambiguous feeling for its host culture vis-à-vis the messianic hope of a new country elsewhere made the Jews socially and politically irrelevant in the Indian context. It was incapable of offering any hope for Dalits to repossess their *selfhood*. For these reasons at least we can assert that Dr. Ambedkar could not have considered either converting or leading his community to join the Jewish fold.

In this line of investigation, therefore, if Judaism was not suitable for the Dalits then what could have been Dr. Ambedkar's option? We shall for the last time now turn our attention to our quest.

Chapter IX

Response to Buddhists

Although religions in India had swerved from equality, the situation was not hopeless. There are some signs indicating this. Firstly, social inequality had not crystallized in the form of the caste system when the sacred writings of the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* were being composed. In view of the fact that the mystical idea of realizing one reality permeating the transitory world is based on these sacred writings, we can see its potential to reinforce social equality also. Secondly, eventually when the *Brahmans*, or the priestly class, in their self interest did succeed to establish an unequal society, the *shramans*, or the working class, arose to oppose it too. So we have the *shramanic* tradition challenging and opposing the *brahmanic* tradition in the antique age.¹⁰⁶ Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that the Buddha in line with the former had denounced the latter.

Buddha denounced the caste system. The caste system in its present form was not then existing. The bar against inter-dining and inter-marriage had not then become operative. Things were flexible and not rigid as they are now. But the principle of inequality which is the basis of the caste system had become well established and it was against this principle that Buddha carried on a determined and a bitter fight. How strongly was he opposed to the pretensions of the Brahmins for superiority over the other classes and how convincingly were the grounds of his opposition are to be found in many of his dialogues.¹⁰⁷

This emphasis on equality had attracted Dr. Ambedkar's attention to Buddhism. Although he had not expressed his preference for it until last few years of his life but he had acquainted himself with it since his younger days.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ *Shraman* (*saman* in Pali) is derived from *shram* i.e. to exert in the religious discipline. For instance, in the Brihदारanyaka Upanishad it is used for the mendicants. But later the meaning of *shraman* was changed to connote the heterodox monks. Braj Ranjan Mani (A Fellow of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla) points out that in the Pali Buddhist literature, one comes across the double barreled word *shraman-brahman*, the first referring to all sorts of mendicants including the Buddhists, but the latter denoting upholders of the tradition of Vedas. The Buddha and the Mahavir, the founder of Jainism, are also called *shraman*. Subsequently their followers as well as all those opposed to the religion of Vedas were referred to as *shraman*. Cf. Braj Ranjan Mani. *Debrahmanising History: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2011, p. 417.

¹⁰⁷ B.R. Ambedkar. 'Reformers and Their Fate' (1956), p. 204.

¹⁰⁸ D.C. Ahir points out that Dr. Ambedkar was given K.A. Keluskar's book *Buddha Charitra* i.e. Buddha's Life in Marathi when he was sixteen years old. In 1945 he attended a Buddhist Conference in Ahmadabad, on 20th June 1946 he founded the Siddhartha College (Buddha's name was Siddhartha Gautama) in Mumbai. In 1948 he wrote a foreword in Prof. L. Narasu's book *The Essence of Buddhism*. In 1950 participated in the first Buddhist procession in Delhi. With his influence he prevailed to introduce the Ashoka Chakra on the national flag of India and the emblem of three lions from an Ashokan pillar at Sarnath as the national emblem. Cf. B.A.M Paradkar. 'The Religious Quest of Ambedkar' in Ambedkar and *The Neo-Buddhist Movement*. Chennai: The Christian Literature Society. 1972, p. 65.

Dr. Ambedkar's open and active involvement to promote Buddhism started in 1951 Dr. Ambedkar when he established the Buddhist Society of India. This added gravity to his declaration which he had made earlier on May 5, 1950 to embrace Buddhism along with his *Mahar* community. Once again on October 3, 1954 he broadcasted his preference for Buddhism on All India Radio.

Liberty, equality and fraternity is triplex that has guided my life, not the cliché used in the French Revolution or any other political system, but the one that is embedded deeply in Buddhist religion. The triplex also forms the basis of our Constitution. It works in political field, but it should also be used in our social relationships.¹⁰⁹

This intention was reconfirmed when in December Dr. Ambedkar attended the third conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Rangoon. Immediately he made his intention to convert to Buddhism clear at a celebration to mark the 2500th birth anniversary of the Lord Buddha at Mandale in Myanmar where he went after the conference.¹¹⁰ The advantage of Buddhism was that it was an international religion and was very strong in south Asian countries. It was also Indian in its origin. Although with the ascendancy of the Muslim rulers it had lost some grounds to Islam, it could not be obliterated. The encounters between these two religions were adequately close for the Muslims in Central Asia to call Buddhists *Shamaniyya* or *Sumaniyya* derived from *shramana*¹¹¹ and to absorb the word Buddha in the Arabic language reducing it to *But* to connote an idol. Admittedly the etymological source of *But* can be traced in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* of 1913 which, was the obvious source of Dr. Ambedkar's information.¹¹² Evidently the Buddhists were known for installing Buddha's statues of massive proportions.

The word '*But*' ... is an Arabic word and means an idol. Not many people however know what the derivation of the word '*But*' is. '*But*' is the Arabic corruption of the Buddha. Thus the origin of the word indicates that in the Moslem mind idol worship had come to be identified with the Religion of the Buddha. ... Before Islam came into being Buddhism

¹⁰⁹ Moon, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar*, p. 205.

¹¹⁰ *ibid*, Moon, p. 206.

¹¹¹ Hans Kung, *Christianity and the World of Religions*. London: Collins Publishers, 1987, p. 140.

¹¹² The entry in the Encyclopedia for '*But*' is '*Persian form of the Arabic BUDD*'; Similarly the entry for '*Budd*' is '*The word Budd or Buddha is used with various meanings. It is applied either to a pagoda, to Buddha himself, or to idols, not necessary figures of Buddha. ... BUDD or BUDDHA sometimes means Buddha in authors like Masudi, al-Biruni and Shahrastani. [Shahrastani] defines a BUDD as a person in this world, who is not born, does not marry, neither eats nor drinks and never grows old or dies; this definition evidently refers to incarnate or living Buddhas*'. Cf. *The Encyclopedia of Islam* Vol-2. M.Th. Houtsma *et.al.* Leyden: International Association of the Academies. Late E.J. Brill Ltd., 1913, pp. 769 and 806.

was the religion of Bactria, Parthia, Afghanistan, Gandhar and Chinese Turkestan, as it was the whole Asia.¹¹³

The evidence of vast Buddhist territories in Asia indicates its strength of being open to welcome diverse ethnic nationalities into its fold.

At Dehu when he installed a statue of Buddha, a gift from Rangoon, he said, “After 2500 years we are rejuvenating Buddhism in his own land. ... My mission in life is not over but has started anew”.¹¹⁴ In view of the fact that Buddhism like many other world religions is of several types and denominations, he decided to start his own form of Buddhism i.e. neo-Buddhism or the navayana. The *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* here was the triplex – equality, liberty and fraternity.

Admittedly Buddha’s teaching had attracted Dr. Ambedkar’s attention and to this he responded in a unique way. He was not merely contented to be a disciple but to be a disciple-maker of the great master. Not only was he prepared to walk the way of Buddha, but to help his *Mahar* community follow him too. What comes out of our discussion above is the appropriate material that Buddhism provided to Dr. Ambedkar for the liberation of the Dalits. Let us turn our attention to the question we raised at the beginning of this chapter. Did he find that the triplex liberty, equality and fraternity preserved in Buddhism? We have seen that he did find this in the Buddhist tradition. He found equality in the Buddha’s teaching against the caste-system; he found the idea of liberty in the democratic functioning of the *sangha* or the monastic communities, and similarly fraternity in the idea of *maitri* or friendship, with all sentient beings.

However, Dr. Ambedkar was disappointed with what he observed in the Buddhist countries, namely apathy of Buddhists towards their religion, the rising popularity of Marxism among the younger generation and a complex religious system beyond the reach of ordinary people. Obviously the forms of Buddhism in these countries were not very conducive to facilitate the depressed classes to reclaim their *selfhood*. However, the neo-Buddhism that he embraced with his followers clearly had this on its agenda. This is what Dr. Ambedkar said in his conversion speech, ‘We are fighting for honour and self-respect. We are getting ready to take the human being towards perfection for that we are ready for any sacrifice.’ The fundamental point here is to note that for Dr. Ambedkar repossession of *selfhood* would mean two things: to act and to become. To become self-respecting people in society involved active engagement to combat inequality. However, the religion in Buddhist countries – Myanmar, Bhutan, Tibet and

¹¹³ B.R. Ambedkar. ‘The Decline and Fall of Buddhism’ (1956), idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-3. Mumbai: 1987, p. 230.

¹¹⁴ Op Cit Moon, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar*. p. 206.

Sri Lanka—did not provide adequate fire to fuel this inspiration of Dalits to fight to reclaim their *selfhood*.

Dr. Ambedkar, therefore, had to think of some alternative religion which was indigenous, well developed, rational, moral and just. The question to ask here is this: was he influenced by the idea of the distinction between the indigenous and non-indigenous origins of religions? Did he in the interest of the Dalits wanted them to embrace a religion of Indian origin? An affirmative answer to this is countered by two facts: one, that all through his political life he had refused to compromise on what he thought was good for Dalits; and two, he had been interested in Buddhism much earlier to his promise to Gandhi. Buddhism could not have been an alternative to him to Christianity. If this was so, then Pickett's claim that Dr. Ambedkar twice requested for baptism seems to be an unusual record.¹¹⁵ We can argue that the versions of Thai, Korean or Japanese Buddhism could be as alien as Christianity and Islam were to India. Therefore, conversion to such versions could also alienate the converts from their culture. The solution for all this was to establish Buddhism altogether on a new line of thinking. Dr. Ambedkar did this by inaugurating the *Navayana* or neo-Buddhism.

He accepted Buddhism within the frame of his specific theory of religion. We have seen that for Dr. Ambedkar, Buddhism's significance was both global as well as local for it fulfilled the requirement of *utility* and *justice* which were marks of a good religion. This was obvious in his response to those converted to Buddhism. He challenged them to become the finest disciples of the Buddha so that the whole world could be saved for peace. He wrote,

We must resolve to follow Buddhist religion in the finest way ... if we accomplish this, then we will thrive ourselves, our nation and not only that but the whole world also. Because the Buddhist religion only will be the saviour of the world. Unless there is justice there will be no peace in the world.¹¹⁶

Dr. Ambedkar saw a universal significance of Buddhism in its contribution towards world peace or *ahimsa*. In the Indian context Buddhism was relevant in forging a just and moral society. The fact however is that Buddhism had failed to do this. In Dr. Ambedkar's line of reasoning if we hold that where the classical Buddhism had failed, neo-Buddhism would succeed, then in practical terms this means that neo-Buddhism should enable a just society to emerge. In other words this new religion was now to be the model for building a new Indian society. About this, in his conversion speech, he

¹¹⁵ Arthur G. McPhee. *The Road to Delhi: Bishop J. Waskom Pickett Remembered*. Bangalore: SAIACS Press, 2005, p. 9.

¹¹⁶ B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha Dhamma will be the Saviour of the World' (1956) idem *Writings and Speeches* Vol-17 Part-3. Mumbai: 2003, p. 544.

said, 'In all respects this religion is perfect; it has no stigma at all'.¹¹⁷ That he had relied on Theravada Buddhism is the view of scholars like Hans Kung.¹¹⁸ He did this perhaps due to Theravada's closeness to the original religion of Buddha. Yet in his view the urgency of the Indian context demanded, not its philosophical but its social operation.

That Dr. Ambedkar regarded the neo-Buddhism best suited for Dalits was evident when he led nearly 300,000 people into its fold on October 14, 1956 at Nagpur.¹¹⁹ His wife, Dr. Sharda Kabir, a saraswat Brahmin, also converted along with him. This showed that all people irrespective of their social standing were welcome into its fold. The ardent followers of Dr. Ambedkar have honoured him with an affectionate but nearly a divine title of *Babasaheb*. For this reason they not only accepted his canon of *Buddha and His Dhamma* as authoritative but many also regard him as a *Bodhisattva*,¹²⁰ a conviction which his adherents have even uploaded onto the websites. Dr. Ambedkar in his lifetime would have none of this. In fact he expressed his abhorrence for hero-worship and supermen. But we are left with some questions at the end. Could neo-Buddhism develop its capacity to forge a just society? Will this new society replace religion's role to address our interior yearnings? Can rationality alone fulfil the need of love? A difference between Buddhism and Christianity is that such questions of human yearnings and sufferings in the former are answered by *anicca* or impermanence, whereas in the latter by *agape* or love. Buddhism aims to break through the human ego and cravings whereas Christianity aims to break through sin and covetousness. These are the cause of human misery. A person who has conquered ego with rationality has cultivated a peaceful mind and emerges as a truly developed *selfhood* full of dignity and confidence. However, we still have to wait and see whether neo-Buddhism will succeed to make India a society of free and equal people.

Buddhism was the religion he turned to. We know that there are various types of Buddhists in the world. Dr Ambedkar found these forms were irrelevant for Dalits. As if instinctively driven, as his life drew to an end due to persistent ill-health, he decided to convert to what he had created after his own ideals. He rewrote the scriptures following the gospels both in its ethics and in narrating Buddha's life by removing all those stories which he considered as irrational e.g. the narrative of Gautama's three encounters: with an old man, a sick man and a dead man. This was a diminished form of the traditional Buddhist religion. He had called it the *Navyana* or the neo-Buddhism

¹¹⁷ B.R. Ambedkar. 'The Buddha Dhamma will be the Saviour of the World' (1956), p. 543.

¹¹⁸ Hans Kung. *Christianity and the World Religions*. London: Fount Paperbacks, 1987, p. 406.

¹¹⁹ Keer. *Dr. Ambedkar*. p. 501.

¹²⁰ John C.B. Webster. *Religion and Dalit Liberation: An Examination of Perspectives*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2002, p. 86.

where the *dhamma* of justice was sanctified as a norm for a righteous society. In this way he founded the Religion-of-Principles.

Chapter X

Righteousness Must Transcend Religion

The two formulations with which Dr Ambedkar had reduced religion into a social operation were these: one was to define religion as an *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance*, and the other was to concentrate on two norms—*utility* and *justice*—as the scale to assess the whole universe of religions. We can call these as Dr Ambedkar's reductionist apparatus. As a result of this, his theory ended up in contradictions and his decisions were inconsistent with what he had stood for. This diminutive approach of Dr Ambedkar looks lucid but it hindered him to appreciate the complex makeup of religion. This complexity failed to fit into his norms of *utility*, *justice* or *reason*. He, therefore, eliminated much of religion that fell beyond the scope of his norms e.g. transcendence. But such reduced ideas do not constitute a proper religion. Yet he was so convinced of the social utility of religion that he disregarded both, its diversity of scope, as well as, its plurality in a society. Now if his reductionist apparatus of assessing religions were to destroy its diversified nature, and thereby the religion itself, then it would bring an end to the society too. In the absence of society the operation of religion, by his definition, would become irrelevant. In other words, the *ideal-scheme-of-divine-governance* of a religion has no operational scope if society vanished and its population broke up into minute unrelated floating units.

Be this as it may, Dr Ambedkar inaugurated a new Buddhist community on October 14, 1956 in Nagpur of which he became the first member, and 300,000 followed him on the spot by converting to neo-Buddhism. In this way he succeeded to establish his new religion in the new community on the lines of his reductionist apparatus. This community was not intended to be differentiated into diverse schools of thought and types of practice. Ideally this may not look disjointed but it needs little evidence to realize that in such a homogeneous community those who differ would be marginalized.

By adopting neo-Buddhism Dr Ambedkar found a way of his predicament of being a nationalist yet abandoning his cultural religion. He did what he had publicly announced i.e. renounce Hinduism, yet he could be nationalistic by not adopting a foreign religion. Having reached this decision adopt neo-Buddhism, to Dr Ambedkar abandoned his search for an egalitarian religion. But this was inconsistent with his vision i.e. to establish a just society with the help of an egalitarian religion. This inconsistency was the result of his reductionism.

Let us try to understand why he fell in this trap of reductionism. The reason is that his question—what is a good religion?—was wrong. I think the exercise to prove

the worth of a religion fails to convince others to abandon their religion in order to embrace the better one. What he should have asked was this—how we can agree on a shared-moral-standard for all people in a multi-religious society. This question is also important for the State because it is responsible for maintaining social integration of the nation. To achieve this in a pluralistic society, people of all religions or ideologies need to agree on a common standard of morality. The State, however, can neither guarantee social consent, nor social cohesion nor a shared-moral-standard. Nonetheless once the consensus of shared morality is reached, religions can guarantee adherence to this standard because they have people's loyalty. But Dr Ambedkar did not seek this; instead he wished to establish a just society through a religion that propounded egalitarianism.

In my view the possibility of a shared-moral-standard can best be achieved by inter-religious dialogue. Dialogue is a conference of religions and ideologies where all dissimilar voices—diverse and contradictory—are heard. This demands humility to learn and hold others in a deep respect for their convictions, to be sensitive to the feelings and a desire to engage with the best-of-traditions of others, confidence in one's own faith tradition and politeness in expressing differences. It is possible for all to share a moral standard and from there to develop a value-system acceptable to each religious or ideological group. Such a moral standard can function as a civil morality i.e. as the heart and conscience of the society.

We see in the Indian context that different communities and castes co-exist with mutual disinterest. Even if the laws have made life easier for the Dalits, it has not created for them a social intercourse with the other communities. Here there is a need for reconciliation between those who have been wronged with those who have wronged others. But these initiatives of active-reconciliation should not be confused with making compromises. It will be this mutual acceptance that will restore the *selfhood* of those who have been wronged. *Selfhood* is a positive emotional state of a person. It is evident at the level of personal confidence as well as in the self esteem of a person. This will also be visible in one's mental and physical wellbeing which in turn assures a person to flourish in life. The point is that justice does not automatically create social integration. Action for reconciliation must be undertaken to make the different communities of a society to meet together. Here the emphasis should be to appreciate and celebrate the common humanity of all people in spite of their region-cultural differences. Here a shared-moral-standard of a society can be of help so that justice can be accompanied with reconciliation. It will help the healing of the interior wounds which is an important aspect of restoring a broken person's *selfhood*.

DESPITE IMPERFECTIONS IN DR AMBEDKAR'S RESPONSE TO RELIGIONS, his insistence to test faith on the anvil of justice is valid. Although many had suffered the excesses of the caste system, few in India had responded to it in the way Dr Ambedkar did. Few had reached the level of thinking that he had reached in his times. We learn from him that our faith in what our religions teach us should help us to establish society of equal and free people, in other words a just society. If our religion fails to teach this to us then we must search for an alternative. His aim was to use every bit of religion to promote righteousness and good quality of life. The importance of this is obvious in our times when the revival of Indian identity is not based on righteousness but on culture. The culture's proximity to religion has sacralized it to such an extent that its practices and norms are accepted unquestioningly. In these times Dr Ambedkar's message comes out clearly in favour of righteousness not culture.

Ironically, the one who, along with Mahatma Gandhi had founded the modern democratic nation of India was accorded no State ceremonies at his last rites in Mumbai. Although the *Ashokchakra* or the blue wheel at the centre of the Indian national flag was added at his insistence, his body was not wrapped in it. Neither was he honoured with the twenty-one gun salute nor the sounding of the Last Post at his funeral. Yet millions of people have come to honour him every year since 1956 at *Chaityabhoomi* in Mumbai. This shows that Dalits will remember him and will continue to draw inspiration from him for a long time to come.