AMBEDKAR’S SEARCH FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE: CONVERSION AS A TOOL

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ABSTRACT

Over a long period of history, from ancient to the modern, a large number of scriptural texts of the Hindu Brahminical order have elaborately laid down, defined and re-defined the hierarchical structuring of society, the notions of purity and pollution, the place of people of the different castes in terms of the social gradation, their stipulated activities, their rights and absence of rights. In sum, religion has sanctified discrimination and societal oppression.

Against such a backdrop, conversion has long been a language of protest. In different parts of the country dalits, as individuals or groups, have from the ancient past till today sought solace in religions other than Hinduism. Sometimes they have set up their own religious orders forming sects such as the Ad Dharm and Matua Dharm, at other times they have turned to alternative institutionalized religious options like Christianity and Islam. The major pre-existing institutionalized religions to which sizeable dalit conversion has taken place over the years happen to be Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. Ambedkar’s Buddhist option may be seen in line with this tradition, yet, with a marked difference.

Keywords: Brahminical order, Hierarchical structuring of society, Institutionalized religions, Societal oppression, and Social gradation

INTRODUCTION

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar has been one of the greatest leader’s to have come up in modern India. Few would match his stature. His analysis of Indian society was sharp and intricate; his vision of the future and blueprint of action were radical. Indian democracy, he believed, could not sustain without its socio-economic commitment. At the centre of it all was his uncompromising concern for social justice and his condemnation of the oppressive, Hindu Brahminical social structure. He developed a strong theoretical critique of Hinduism, challenging its religious precepts from a social perspective and searched for an alternative.

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**AMBEDKAR’S CRITIQUE OF HINDUISM**

Ambedkar was a believer in religion. Religion, he believed, is a necessity of human existence. It is a part of one’s “social inheritance.” To him, it was a matter of right living and a framework for a moral life. He conceptualised it as a system of moral values, a system of injunctions and prohibitions designed to promote a harmonious human life. A harmonious human life itself meant a life in which there is equality and brotherhood among its members and one which is rationalistic in rejecting superstitions, mysticism, irrationality, blind belief; in short, he had a humanistic rationalistic notion of religion. It would probably not be wrong to suggest that he had set his heart on a scientific religion of the type Victorians were trying to seek desperately as a way out of the personally agonising conflict between their Christian beliefs and their scientific knowledge (Rao, 1993: 66-67).

In December 1935, Mr Sant Ram, the Secretary of the Jat Pat Todak Mandal, had written in a letter to Ambedkar “…it is my well considered opinion that none else has studied the problem of caste so deeply as you have….. I am now very anxious to read the exposition of your new formula – ‘it is not possible to break caste without annihilating the religious notions on which it, the caste system, is founded” (Ambedkar, 1979: 25, 27). The letter, excerpts of which have been quoted, was written to Ambedkar to invite him to preside over the annual conference of the Jat Pat Todak Mandal, an organisation of caste Hindu social reformers. On the basis of the invitation Ambedkar prepared his presidential address. However, the organisers found it to be so harsh on Hindu religion that at first they requested him to delete certain portions and later, when Ambedkar refused to do so, they chose to ‘postpone the meeting sine die’ (Ibid: 32). Even as Mr Har Bhagwan, on behalf of the organisers felt of Ambedkar’s proposed speech that, ‘the last portion which deal with the complete annihilation of Hindu religion and doubts the morality of the sacred books of the Hindus as well as a hint about your intention to leave the Hindu fold does not seem to me to be relevant’ (Ibid: 31). Ambedkar insisted ‘I most emphatically maintain that the portion objected to is not only most relevant but is also important’ (Ibid: 33).

Religions, Ambedkar insisted, should be judged by social standards and be based on social ethics (Ibid: 25). He identified four basic characteristic of religion. First, he felt, religion in the sense of morality must remain the governing principle of every society. Secondly, religion, if it is to function must be in accord with reason which is merely another name for science. Thirdly, its moral codes must acknowledge the fundamental tenets of liberty, equality and fraternity. Fourthly, Religion must not sanctify or ennoble poverty (Ambedkar, 1950).

Hinduism failed the above tests. “What is called religion by the Hindus”, he noted, “is nothing but a multitude of commands and prohibitions”. As pointed out by K. Raghavendra Rao, an eminent scholar, Ambedkar was virtually haunted all his life by Hinduism ‘like a ghost, and he was constantly wrestling with it one way or the other’ (Rao, 1993: 68). A critique of the Hindu philosophy was attempted by him in several of his writings. He either concentrated solely on developing a critique of Hinduism or took it up as part of a wider project. The *Philosophy of Hinduism, Revolution and Counter-revolution, Riddles of Hinduism* were just some of the many places in which he critiqued Hinduism. The core of the Hindu scheme of governance, he noted, is enshrined in a written constitution and “anyone who cares to know it will find it laid bare in that sacred book called the *Manu Smriti*, a divine code which lays down the rules which govern the religious, ritualistic and social life of the Hindus in minute detail and which must be regarded...
as the Bible of the Hindus and containing the philosophy of Hinduism” (Ibid: 69). This Hinduism he attempts to test against the yardstick of utility and justice and finds that it fails both the tests. Justice, he points out, is simply another name for liberty, equality and fraternity. But, in Hinduism “you will find both social inequality and religious inequality”. By denying social equality and economic security Hinduism, he showed, denies liberty. Hinduism fails even the test of fraternity as fraternity can arise only where there is a sentiment of fellow feeling and with the existence of nearly two to three thousand castes this sentiment cannot grow. As for utility, he noted that the very structure and ideology of caste destroyed social utility and by denying justice, Hinduism ipso facto denied utility. “How”, he asked “can a philosophy which dissects society in fragments, which dissociates work from interest, which disconnects intelligence from labour, which expropriates the right of man to interests vital to life and which prevented society from mobilising resources for common action in the hour of danger, be said to satisfy the test of Social Utility”. Thus viewed, he asserted, “Hinduism is Superman’s heaven and the common man’s damnation.”

The Search for a Non-hindu Identity

In the initial years as he critiqued Hinduism, Ambedkar had hoped to reform the religion rather than to reject it. But gradually he came to realise the futility of such efforts. The epoch-making episode of the Mahad Satyagraha, followed by the long-drawn Kalaram Temple Satyagraha, the historic battle with Gandhian Hinduism at the Round Table Conferences in London and the trauma of the events leading up to the Poona Pact left Ambedkar an embittered man. Ever since the Mahad Conference in 1927, at every Depressed Classes Conference, resolutions in renunciation of Hinduism were passed. At the Jalgaon Conference held on 29th May 1929 a resolution was passed calling upon members of the Scheduled Castes to embrace any religion other than Hinduism.

Ambedkar’s experiences with the Congress leadership in the context of Round Table Conferences were extremely bitter. While his own performance won him widespread acclaim as an astute statesman and leader of the Untouchables, Gandhi’s rabid opposition to the demand for separate electorates for the Untouchables, his ‘fast unto death’ drove a permanent wedge between Ambedkar and the Congress. The latter, even as he conceded to accept the Poona Pact, came to believe in the futility of the Depressed Classes expecting any help from the Congress in future and was firmly convinced that the days of pleading with the Hindus was over. The time had come for hard bargaining.

In 1935, at the Yeola Conference Ambedkar’s theoretical rejection of Hinduism was firmly established. He declared that he would not die a Hindu. At the Conference he moved a resolution to the effect: “We have made strenuous efforts to bring about a rapprochement between the so-called Untouchables and the caste Hindus. …But the caste Hindus have evinced no sign of change of heart. …..the ‘Untouchables’ should no longer waste their energies on such efforts. Let us put a stop to satyagrahas; get away from the Hindus; and achieve an honourable position of equality with all people of India…Because we call ourselves Hindus we are treated thus. If we were members of another faith nobody would treat us thus…. I had the misfortune of being born with the stigma of ‘untouchability’ that is not my fault; but I shall not die a Hindu; this is in my power” (Kadam, 1991: 43).
In the *Annihilation of Caste*, published in 1936, a small but extremely radical and thought provoking essay originally written for a conference of the Arya Samajist Jat-Pat Todak Mandal of Lahore but which he was not permitted to deliver because of its all too radical overtones, Ambedkar clearly distinguishes between what he calls the religion of rules and the religion of principles. While he condemned the former, he upheld the latter: “While I condemn a religion of rules, I must not be understood to hold the opinion that there is no necessity for religion. On the contrary I agree with Burke when he says that true religion is the foundation of society’, the basis on which all true civil government rests, …when I urge that these ancient rules of life be annulled, I am anxious that their place shall be taken by a religion of principles which alone can lay claim to being a true religion.”

For six years prior to the mid-thirties the Mahars had been trying in vain to gain for temple entry rights. It was also a time when in the political arena the Untouchables presence was being consolidated. There was thus on the one hand the sense of futility at the orthodoxy of the Hindu social order. On the other hand there were the unfolding possibilities of obtaining greater political leverage through a firm social stance, resulting from a threatened break away from the Hindu folds. The demand for joint electorate with adult franchise before the Simon Commission in 1928 gave way to the insistence on separate electorates at the Round Table Conference in 1930, with Ambedkar emphatically arguing that the Depressed Classes should be regarded as “ a distinct and independent minority”. “We cannot be deemed as part of the Hindu community”, he insisted.

Believing in the importance of religion, *per se*, Ambedkar could not opt for an atheistic solution as the obvious corollary to the rejection of Hinduism. The rejection of Hinduism had to go along with the acceptance of some other religion. Hence, came to the question of conversion to some other religion.

While ultimately Buddhism emerged as the religion of choice, for a time Ambedkar seems to have contemplated of choosing either Islam, Sikhism, or Christianity. Conversion to Islam and Christianity were ruled out on the ground that such conversion would de-nationalise the Depressed Classes (Kuber, 1978: 47-8). He appears to have been relatively more serious about Sikhism. However, after several rounds of discussions with the Sikhs, it appears that Ambedkar, for the time being, shelved the conversion issue. While Eleanor Zelliot suggests that he ‘let the issue of conversion lapse, probably because he felt that the reserved seats won for the Depressed Classes might have to be sacrificed by conversion to Sikhism’ (Murthy, 1978: 82), it is equally possible that other factors were considered. B.S. Murthy, cited in turn by Ambedkar’s biographer W.N. Kuber, had a rather straight jacketed perspective when he noted “The only answer seem to be that he [Ambedkar] dearly loved all that was best in Hinduism.” Other possibilities, too, could not be ruled out. For example, expectations of using conversion as a weapon for snatching benefits for the Scheduled Castes might have been a major determinant in suggesting conversion and conversion as such may not actually have been intended at that point of time. Also, there may have been a certain apprehension about the extent to which his followers would go along with him in the conversion move. Demanding political rights or even theoretically criticising Hinduism could seem to be more acceptable to his followers rather than abandoning Hinduism, the ancestral religion, altogether. A conference of Mahars which met in 1936 at Bombay
expressed their resolve to leave Hinduism but as Zelliot herself noted of the developments, “the reaction to this announcement among the Mahars beyond the reach of the Conference is hard to judge; …it is doubtful that disbelief in the efficacy of prayers and vows to the Hindu gods suddenly descended, and such Hindu rituals as were used for weddings and other ceremonies undoubtedly continued.” Whatever may have been the actual cause, the issue of conversion was not taken up till much later.

**THE CONVERSION TO BUDDHISM**

The conversion, when it ultimately came, was not to Sikhism, but to Buddhism. Conversion of Untouchables was not altogether unknown earlier. Both Islam and Christianity had drawn large numbers of their converts from the lower castes, and Sikhism in the twentieth century had actively encouraged Untouchables’ conversion. Conversions to Buddhism too had taken place, though not in large numbers. In 1931, in Cochin, as per the Report of the Census Commissioner, 96 Buddhists mostly hailing from the *Malayali Iluvan* caste (an Untouchable caste), had converted to Buddhism in disgust with the social disabilities to which their caste was subject within the Hindu fold.

Ambedkar’s own interest in Buddhism was generated early in his life when in 1908 he laid hands on a copy of Buddha’s life. As he contemplated on the possibilities of conversion later in his life his interest in Buddhism was revived and it was ultimately to that religion that he recommended the conversion of the Depressed Classes.

In 1948 Ambedkar’s book *The Untouchables* was published. In it, he said, *inter alia*, that the Untouchables had formerly been Buddhists. They had been degraded and banished from their villages because of their faith in Buddhism at a time when others were returning to Brahminism (Kuber, 1978: 137). Ambedkar argued ‘it is clear that the Muslim invasions are not the only invasions ….If Hindu India was invaded by the Muslim invaders, so was Buddhist India invaded by Brahminic invaders’ (Omvedt, 1994: 246). By 1951 Ambedkar was urging his followers to convert to Buddhism. It was in that year that he began writing his monumental work, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*.

In an important article entitled “The Buddha and the future of his religion” which Ambedkar contributed to *the Mahabodhi’s* April-May 1950 issue, he reiterated the need for a religion, but also spelt out the requirements of that religion: “I maintain that society must have either the sanction of law or the sanction of morality to hold it together. Without either, society is sure to go to pieces. In all societies law plays a very small part. It is intended to keep the minority within the range of social discipline. The majority is left to sustain its social life by postulates and sanctions of morality. Religion in the sense of morality, must therefore, remain the governing principle in every society”.

Ambedkar, in the course of the same article further maintained that:

1. Religion must be in accord with science. Religion is bound to lose respect, and therefore become the subject of ridicule; and thereby not merely lose its force as a governing principle of life, but might in course of time disintegrate and lapse….In other words, religion if it is to function, must be in accord with reason which is merely another name for science.
Religion as a code of social morality must recognise the fundamental tenets of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Unless a religion recognises these three fundamentals of social life, religion will be doomed.

The merits of Buddhism, as perceived by Ambedkar, were seen as follows:

a) Buddhism demands living existence and a life divine attainable here and now, not after death;

b) it is a realism not an idealism;

c) it upholds liberty, equality, truth and justice;

d) it is dynamic, scientific and all-embracing;

e) its explanations of life, birth and death are clear and logical;

f) man is the centre of its study, nothing outside him.

An interesting distinction was made between ‘dharma’ and ‘dhamma’. The Buddha’s was not a dharma but a dhamma. Dharma he asserted was religion and a religion is personal, one which one must keep to oneself. Dhamma, in contrast, signifies a rationalistic and humanistic way of life; it is social; it is righteousness, which means right relations between man and man, in all spheres of life, and, society cannot do without dhamma (Ambedkar, 1992: 316). Religion is a religion of rules whilst dhamma is a matter of principles. In the latter there is no place for prayers, pilgrimages, rituals, ceremonies or sacrifices, or even god. In the Buddha’s dhamma, since there is no place for god, “morality takes the place of god.”

The actual conversion took place in 1956 shortly before Ambedkar’s death. The initial ceremony of the great conversion, as it is frequently referred to, was held on 14th October, 1956. Dr Ambedkar first took the Diksha at the hands of the oldest Buddhist monk in India and then, the next day, administered the simple conversion rites to a crowd estimated between 300,000 to 600,000. In Buddhism, Ambedkar found an Indian, not a foreign, religion which could legitimize the claims of the Mahars.

By 1956, Buddhism as a religion had won a place of recognition and esteem in India, even though the numbers of followers were limited. The symbols of independent India, the wheel on the flag and the lion pillar, were Buddhist or from Buddhist times; two important neighbours of India, Burma and Ceylon were Buddhist; several important scholars including D.D.Kosambi, were undertaking research on Buddhism; and, a few noted intellectuals (Rahul Sankrityayana and Anand Kausalyayan, Kashyap) had become Buddhists out of conviction.

The conversion was not an individual act. Hundreds and thousands of mahars joined in it. It was in a sense the climaxing of the social revolt as Ambedkar saw it; where, for the oppressed, the conversion signified a social rebirth.

Ambedkar’s conversion speech was simple. He rationalised the life of the Buddha and explained his teachings, and in the twenty-two Buddhists oaths which formed part of the conversion ritual, he extolled his followers to follow the teachings of Buddhism in rejection of Hinduism.

With the conversion to Buddhism, Ambedkar sought to place his contestation of Hinduism on a concrete footing. Buddhism was seen as a liberation theology and it’s ‘Dhamma’ as social
morality and not as ‘Dharma’ signifying religious ethics. It was an attempt to build a conscious non-Hindu identity for the Depressed Classes and provide them with a rallying point. The conversion could be expected to usher in a stage where the Untouchables would cease to do things the Hindu way; that is, refuse to carry out the demeaning tasks which the Hindu social order required of them. The conversion oaths devised by Ambedkar for the Nagpur ceremony not only contained positive statements about Buddhism as such but also included negative statements about Hinduism. In view of its significance, the oaths are being reproduced below:

1. I will not regard Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh as gods nor will I worship them.*
2. I will not regard Rama and Krishna as gods nor will I worship them.*
3. I will not accept Hindu deities like Gauri, Ganapati etc., nor will I worship them.*
4. I do not believe that God had taken birth or incarnation in any form.*
5. I do not believe that Lord Buddha was the incarnation of Vishnu. I believe this propaganda as mischievous and false.*
6. I will never perform any Sharaadha nor will I offer any Pinda.*
7. I will never act against the tenets of Buddhism.
8. I will never get any Samskaar performed by Brahmins.*
9. I believe in the principle that all are equal.
10. I will try to establish equality.
11. I will follow the eight fold path of lord Buddha.
12. I will follow all the ten Paramitas of the Dhamma.
13. I will have compassion on all living beings and will try to look after them.
14. I will not lie.
15. I will not commit theft.
16. I will not indulge in lust or sexual transgression.
17. I will not take any liquor or drink that causes intoxication.
18. I will try to mould my life in accordance with the Buddhist preachings based on Enlightenment, Precept and Compassion.
19. I embrace today the Bauddha Dhamma discarding the Hindu Religion which is detrimental to the emancipation of human beings and which believes in inequality and regards human beings other than the Brahmins as low born.*
20. This is my firm belief that Bauddha Dhamma is the best religion.
21. I believe that today I am taking New -birth.
22. I solemnly take oath that from today onwards I will act according to the Bauddha DHAMMA.

[* - indicates those vows which involve a direct rejection of Hinduism and the Hindu way of life]
SIGNIFICANCE OF AMBEDKAR’S CONVERSION MOVEMENT

One of the many imprints of Ambedkar’s conversion movement can be found in the impressive range of material on Buddhism produced in Maharashtra as a result of the Ambedkarite movement. The literature broadly includes— 1) guides to ritual and practice and histories of the conversion; 2) literature on the history and legends of Buddhism; 3) songs about Ambedkar and the conversion; 4) creative literature by Buddhists of the educated elite. A large number of Buddhists in Maharashtra, illiterate and educated alike are held together by the common belief that the Buddhist conversion has liberated them and that holds out the only hope for the enjoyment of full human rights and dignity. On the whole, most significantly, it has set in motion the emergence of the consciousness of the dalit identity. A consciousness which bloomed in the pages of the revolutionary dalit literature of Maharashtra through the seventies, going hand in hand with the emergence of the Dalit Panthers in the political front, reminding one of the earlier likewise search for self esteem by the Afro-Americans.

As of now, however, in material socio-economic terms, the effects of the mass conversions though significant, have not been too dramatic. On the one hand, refusal to perform caste ordained social and economic functions had been mounting amongst these sections of the people ever since the thirties. On the other hand, those who converted to Buddhism were not overnight socially emancipated by virtue of the conversion. Much of the same pressures continued to operate upon them even after their conversion as before such conversion. Besides, the inherent problems in the search for a religious solution remained; dalits embracing Buddhism could get caught up in other forms of superstition.

In the ultimate analysis however, it needs to be remembered that conversion was not perceived of by Ambedkar as an isolated tool, but rather as complementary to other tools of protest which he was developing on a more secular plane.

A notable feature of Ambedkar’s ideas is his repeated reference to Marxism in relation to Buddhism. Many of his disciples misused it as his opposition and even extended it to enmity to Marxism. It is untrue and unfortunate. Like his claims to have checked the consistency of Buddhist tenets with those of modern science, he claimed that his Buddhism was Marxism plus some thing. It certainly shows that he did not hold Marxism in the same esteem as science, but there is no doubt that he considered Marxism as the near-best and willed that his chosen religion should contain all of it and be superior to it.

Today, the Indian Buddhist minority, have become the most powerful group— not only numerically constituting the majority of the Indian Buddhists but also being politically very active, well trained and assertive (Weber, 1999).

However, it is also pertinent to note that Buddhists in India adhering to the monastic orders are critical of the Ambedkarite conversions to Buddhism, considering them as politically motivated and note in keeping with the true spirit of Buddhism. A critique of Ambedkar’s The Buddha And His Dhamma can be found in the booklet written by Dr Rastrapal Mahathera entitled Dr B.R. Ambedkar’s The Buddha and His Dhamma: A Rejoinder. Tripitika Visarada, Mahathera upholding the Theravada school of Buddhism and propagating Vipassana meditation as the path of happiness of mankind. He alleges of Ambedkar’s exercise that, “Dr Ambedkar’s work itself has become puzzling and baffling because of biased and distorted views. It does not carry the ordinary
norms of historiography. As many as about five hundred or more biographies of the Buddha are available by this time, but very few suffer from this sort of propagandistic approaches to historical events and facts. Therefore one fails to understand the necessity or propriety of writing this type of sub-standard biography of the Buddha” (Mahathera, 2000: 27-8).

Economic and educational considerations apart, most importantly Ambedkar’s conversion call emerged as a rallying call for identity formation of the dalits, particularly in western and northern India. Special occasions for celebration of events have been identified in terms of the Buddhist conversion tradition. The Diksha bhoomi has virtually emerged as a place of regular pilgrimage of dalits and the Viharas have come up as gathering grounds for the community. Eva-Maria Hardtmann noted in her work (Hardtmann, 2011) the minute details of the contemporary functioning of the Viharas in U.P. noting that “taking part in the Buddhist ceremonies in the viharas seemed to be a way for the dalit Buddhists to learn more about Buddhist rituals and about Ambedkar. It was also a way to introduce Ambedkar and Buddhism to their children.” As observed by the reputed Ambedkarite scholar Eleanor Zelliot, “The psychological impact of Buddhism, the matter of changed identity, cannot be judged by visible signs.” As the same author notes, “psychological freedom from the sense of being a polluting person is a major achievement of the Buddhist conversion.”

Not that all, or even a majority of dalits chose to accept the Buddhist option. In fact, a sizeable portion of the Ambedekarites stayed outside the Buddhist fold. Nonetheless, the impact made on the dalit political movement by those who chose to become Buddhists is noteworthy. It undoubtedly contributed to the rise of a new awareness and new elite. In the rise of the Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra in the 1970s, for example, the impact of Buddhism was clearly evident. Leaders like Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Dhale, belonging to different factions of the movement, recognized the liberating significance of Buddhism. In mainstream dalit politics of the Bahujan Samaj Party, Kanshiram spoke of Buddhism and his proposed conversion. It is reported that his last rites were done along lines of Buddhist rituals. In 1996, in the meetings aimed at reviving the Republican Party of India in U.P. many spoke about Buddhism as the philosophy that should guide the party and quoted Ambedkar’s Buddha and his Dhamma.

The greatest significance of the conversion movement of Ambedkar lies in his attempt to weld together two very different lines of struggles in ensuring social justice for the dalits. One line of struggle rested on the traditional language of protest— the religious struggle. The other, rested on the modern language of parliamentary politics. He was probably the first to attempt this bonding of the two very diverse languages of protest at the national level. Even as he suffered setbacks in his political struggles using the modern language of politics, he turned to the other language, the religious. The implications of this were to unfold in the decades to come. Stepping beyond the Ambedkarite path, yet drawing inspiration from his struggles, dalits have embraced other religions and surged ahead to demand their rightful space. The on-going struggles of the Christian dalits in and outside the Church are a pointer in this respect.

GOING BEYOND AMBEDKAR: BUILDING AN ALTERNATIVE CULTURE

As the great and the lowly were differentiated within the parameters of the Brahminical cultural perspective, the culture of the upper castes was projected as superior, or put it in a different way, upper caste people were said to be ‘cultured’, whilst others were the ‘uncultured’
folk. A wide-ranging variety of tools, ranging from religious jargon and educational formulations to overt exercises of violence, were systematically used for the purpose of propagation and sustenance of the Brahminical notion. The Brahminical ethos has been so strongly projected over time that not only the caste Hindus, but even the marginalised castes widely accept the values, thereby cooperating in their own exploitation. By projecting an alternative religious route Ambedkar promoted the process of weaning them away from the Brahminical fold. Others, before and after him have explored alternative religious options. Thus, some have tried to develop new religious discourses; some have sought solace in other institutionalized religions like Christianity or Islam.

While the religious paths opted for have been different, the rejection of Brahminical Hinduism has been the common theme. The momentum that Ambedkar gave to the entire exercise was indeed unique.

However, stopping at conversion has its limits. The struggles need to go beyond conversion to build up an alternative cultural milieu, resting on an alternative world view. Rejection of Brahminism would have to remain intrinsic to the efforts. This however could take on the form of conversion to one or the other pre-existing religions, formulating a new religious discourse or searching for a no-god solution. In this context, a couple of points need to be considered. First, there is little possibility of all converted dalits choosing to turn to one single religious order, even when they reject Brahminical Hinduism. The converted would remain fragmented by religion as is evident from the contemporary scenario. Secondly, even while placing the emphasis on rejection of Brahminical Hinduism, conversion can be seen as only a part of the total struggle for discarding the Brahminical ethos. While the idea was integral to Ambedkar’s struggle and manifest itself in different forms in the subsequent Ambedkarites’ efforts, it stopped short of working towards systematically engineering a total cultural alternative. This needs to be worked on carefully and minutely; its urgency needs to be comprehended as also the enormous difficulties in realizing the efforts. It is pertinent to remember that culture is most commonly viewed as a social heritage transmitted through generations and imbibed through a process of learning. Even as values form the core of any cultural order, their transmission is by and large a matter of routine habit rather than conscious formulation and acceptance on the part of the concerned people. The values sustaining caste need to be countered by alternative values and the routine habits revolving around Brahminical customs, ritual and practices have to be systematically replaced by non-brahminical ones.

It is here, perhaps, that we may turn to the contributions of E.V.Ramasami (EVR), better known as Periyar. It is pertinent to recall that even as EVR’s movement developed along political lines involving a denunciation of Congress and Gandhian politics, it went well beyond the political discourse and encompassed the entire gamut of society. His efforts, resting on the no-god, rationalist approach, were directed towards re-structuring Indian culture, weaning it away from the Brahminical stranglehold with the aim of non-Brahminising society and creating a suitable cultural milieu. He structured his alternative culture in terms of the Self Respect Movement, urging people to reject the Brahmins and their Shastras, adopt Self Respect Marriages, re-define gender relations and challenge role stereotypes. A few lessons may be drawn from that angle.
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