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Conversion among Dalits

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Abstract:

There were many social and reformatory movements to help the weak and the downtrodden to acquire social, political and economic justice. But these movements were either wholly regional or had a limited range of impact. The conversion movement initiated by Ambedkar is one movement, which has attempted to gather together the downtrodden and the exploited class and offer them a new status in the society. It is thus a quiet revolution. Of all the evils that are perpetuated under the garb of religion, conversion is vilest. The oppressed classes of which there is no dearth in this country, conversions pose the greatest threat to public order. The threat of conversion from being an expression of anger has now become a political fad feeding the hungry bigots, who linger on the sidelines, salivating for their pound of flesh. Now, dalits facing oppression threaten to convert, dalits facing eviction threaten to convert, dalits facing poverty threaten to convert. Even those protesting lack of civic amenities threaten to convert.

Key words: Dalits, Conversion

1. Introduction

Dalits in India are the most oppressed and the worst sufferers throughout the ages. Mahatmas, kings and social reformers have come and gone, but Dalits have remained half naked, hungry, ignorant and cheated. The Hindu religion has condemned these people as 'untouchables'. Having been deprived of all the opportunities in the socio-economic, educational and political field, the depressed classes have suffered silently in tyrannical hands of caste Hindus, to whom caste and religion are more important than human beings.

The Hindu religion and its laws have waged the most oppressive and inhuman war on untouchables. Many restrictions were imposed on Dalits. Of which a few could be mentioned in brief. Dr. Ambedkar (1946:31) mentioned that the Sudra was prohibited from milking a cow, whose milk was to be used for Agnihotra, from witnessing the performance of sacrifice, from taking some drink, from the opening ceremony, from studying Vedas and from kindling the sacred fire.

The Brahmins manipulated in the ancient days and assigned themselves to the work of writing religious texts and created such a social system in which their position, honour and glory were raised. Manu the ancient law giver, wrote in his "manusmriti" (Chapter I, verse 31) that the creator has created four varnas for the prosperity of world. God created four different varnas from different parts of his body viz., Brahmin from his mouth, Kshatriya from his arms, Vaishya from his thighs and Shudra from the feet, such type of explanation regarding Varna system given by Manu divides society into watertight compartments and infuses the idea of high and low, superiority and inferiority among the people. This system debarred untouchables from enjoying any type of religious freedom.

2. Review of Literature

The social system based on religion in ancient times was undemocratic and it never allowed lower castes to mix and mingle with upper castes. Many artificial prohibitions were imposed on them. The crude laws framed by the vested interests kept the Shudras in fear and despicable position. In this regard Buhler G. (1886:271) mentioned from Manusmriti". If Shudra mentioned the name and class of twice-born continuously an hot iron nail of ten fingers would be thrust into his mouth, the king should pour oil into the mouth and ears of Shudra if he disrespected the Brahmin and arrogantly behaved with him.

Caste system is mainly responsible for the social disharmony among different sections of people. The roots of exploitation are found in the caste system. Hence Sudras were deprived of all the opportunities deliberately and were reduced to the weakest position. In this respect Dr. Ambedkar (1936:28) writes, "on account of the Chaturvarna untouchables could receive no education. They could not think out or know the way to their salvation. They were condemned to be lowly and not knowing the way of escape and not having means to escape, they became reconciled to eternal servitude their inescapable fate".

The caste Hindu knew that if the culture of the lower castes is destroyed, ultimately they will fall into rigid superstitions and bad customs, ultimately they cannot compete with the forward castes and this would secure the positions of upper castes and maintain their rule in the society and there would be no threat to their happy living, Dr. Ambedkar (Ibid : 31) further writes, "Hindus have deliberately prevented the lower castes, who are within the pale of Hinduism from rising to the cultural level of higher castes". Therefore the lower castes, being in the fold of Hinduism, always feel that they are the slaves of caste Hindus.

Brahmins throughout the history have cared only for their material happy life and ruling interest in the name of religion. Brahmins were mainly responsible for building the ancient Indian social and religious system. In this context, J.R. Kamble (1979:5-6) writes, "Brahmins paid no attention to the social ills. They had no sympathy for the oppressed and depressed classes. They promoted no movement to strengthen the hands of brotherhood by spreading true knowledge. Under this system the fate of the downtrodden was sealed. For their social, religious privileges and occupations, training, education right from the birth to death; the poor souls suffered at the hands of caste Hindus more particularly under Brahmins".

Parvathamma (1986) analysed few important protest movements in India, including anti-caste movements initiated by Basava in the form of Veerashaivism, in historical perspective. Some of these movements were anti-Brahmanical, but not anti-Hindu and were assimilated in the mainstream of caste-ridden Hinduism. She also analysed the anti-Brahmanic organizations especially Justice Party, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and Anna Dravidan Munnetra Kazhagam and the SNDP movement in south India. The comprehensive movement of the Scheduled castes led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar is traced from the phase of Scheduled Caste Federation to Republic party of India to Dalit Panthers through Dalits. It seems to indicate the built-in incapacity of the lower castes to effectively combine against the pressure of the dominant upper castes.

Shah, Ghanshyam (1990) classified Dalit movements into two types, Reformatory movements and Alternative movements. The first type relates to solving the problems arising out of the caste system and removal of untouchability. The second type centers around the creation of a movement of alternative culture and socio-cultural structure by conversion to another religion.

3. Objectives

The study proposes to understand the dalit movement towards the conversion.

4. Methodology

The present data is collected from secondary sources like books, journals, online articles etc.

5. Dalits under Christianity

In the pre-independent era under the British colonial rulers there was mass conversions to Christianity in the late 19th and early 20th century periods. At that time Britishers had a measure of protection from atrocities against them by the district and state officials. Gandhiji did not favour the state officials. Gandhiji did not favour the conversion of dalits to Christianity or any other religion. He advocated religious bonds to be a matter of the heart. But many untouchables, including Dr. Ambedkar felt that, rejection of Hinduism and wholesome conversion to other religion in the only solution to the problem of untouchability.

Christian missions were spending a lot of conversion mostly in eastern, southern and central regions of India. Their missionaries opened educational institutions, hospitals, churches and other centers, which could benefit the weaker sections of the society. The temptation given by them was the economic security and welfare for their children. Christian missionaries are flirting with dalits, rightly, no doubt, from their own standpoint they are spending lavishly on them and holding out hope of real freedom and equality of social status.

6. Dr. Ambedkar and Conversion

Dr. Ambedkar was born as an untouchable, who had to face several traumatic experiences since the early years of his life. The first such rude and shattering which he experienced at the young age when he and his elder brother were thrown out of the bullock cart by a god fearing caste Hindu cartman. On that day he knew that he belonged to a family of untouchables. It was his first experience with untouchables when many such insults followed in his life later. He was denied the learning of Sanskrit when he was in school. The climax of humiliations was reached at Baroda after his return from USA. He was refused drinking water by the services of caste-Hindu peons in his office. He was also denied a shelter in the city of Baroda. This proved the fact that even with his personal attainment, it could not soften the prejudices of the caste Hindus. Ambedkar was terribly grieved at such incidents. At the same time he began to observe and understand the grievances of the untouchable community as a whole.

Then he made various attempts to provide both political and social equality for his people. Various plans of social and political reforms as proposed by Ambedkar did not seem to reach the level of success he desired. This evoked in him an intense feeling of revolt against the Hindu social order. He had to fight all the way to securing his people even ordinary human rights. When all attempts failed, he eventually started thinking of renouncing Hinduism. At Jalgaon, in 1929, he advised the untouchables to embrace any other religion that would regard them as human beings and would give them an equal opportunity to rise up in the world. Consequently a few untouchables thought of embracing Islam. However, when a group of untouchables from a village near Nasik decided to embrace Islam. Ambedkar advised them to wait for some more time and see whether they could still find a place in Hinduism without taking such an extreme step.

The real and substantial progress came at the Conference met at Yeola a town near Nasik in 1953. At this conference, which was convened by the leaders of the depressed classes, they reviewed the political and social situation in the light of their ten years struggle. They drew plans to initiate further action. The conference was attended by thousands of untouchables from distant places. Dr. Ambedkar recounted the plight of the depressed classes in all spheres such as economic, social, educational and political spheres. He pointed out the immense sacrifices made by them to secure the barest human rights while yet living under the aegis of Hinduism. He said that in spite of the time and money spent, the efforts made to achieve the objectives of human rights and equal status in Hindu society had proved utterly fruitless. He, therefore expressed his opinion that the time for making a final decision to settle the matter had arrived. He then exhorted them to sever their connections with Hinduism and seek solace and self-respect in any another religion. He warned them to be very careful in choosing the new faith and to see the equality in treatment status and opportunities were guaranteed to them without any reservation.

Referring to his personal decision in the matter of conversing he said that unfortunately he was born a Hindu untouchable. However, he declared that it was well within his power to refuse to live under the existing humiliating conditions and so he said, "I solemnly assure you that I will not die as a Hindu".

After giving the call for conversion and after assessing the pulse of his followers, there started a new phase in the life of Ambedkar's and in his movement for the liberation of the untouchables. This phase is the long period of preparation for the ultimate action of conversion.

Though he had made the declaration about his determination to renounce Hinduism, he had avoided declaring the religion, which would be embraced. The leaders of various religions like Islam, Sikhism, Christianity, Buddhism started pressing Ambedkar to embrace their own religion and win equality and freedom. Having resolved to renounce Hinduism, Ambedkar pursued his search for a religious framework within which the untouchables could find equal status and would be able to participate meaningfully in the political life of the country. He thus embarked on a comparative study of all the religions of India.

In his comparative study of all religions, Ambedkar confessed that only two personalities – Buddha and Christ-captivated him. He was aware of the Christian contribution to the world. He was in search of a religion, which preached equality, fraternity and liberty. However, Ambedkar found that in India, Christianity worked along the existing grooves of caste system and was split into denominations. Besides, Ambedkar thought that conversion to Christianity or Islam would denationalise the depressed classes and it would send them out of Hindu culture. Jainism, he thought, was not a powerful religion and its preaching of extreme "Ahimsa" (non-violence) was unacceptable. Thus Ambedkar critically evaluated various religions because he wanted to have a permanent answer to the complex problems of the untouchables.

Ruling out all other systems of faith and the ideology Ambedkar's ultimate choice fell on Buddhism. Ultimately he converted to Buddhism in 1956, along with the large number of scheduled caste people in Maharashtra and northern part of Karnataka state. Hence in Karnataka the large number of Neo-Buddhists are found in northern part of Belgaum district, which was influenced by Maharashtra.

It is a grand farm harvested by faithful shepherds, where any sheep can graze. The shepherds for their part have room for all the enclosures for washing their sins off. Of course, it is now upto us, children of a lesser god, to inquire whatever happened to a sheep that defected in favour of greener pastures and whether they are all living in blissful egalitarian and economic glory in the promised land. They convert to other religions to find something new.

There is no salvation for Dalits in Hinduism. The religion, which does not recognize human being as human being, is a curse. Therefore for annihilating castes, the change of religion is the only antidote. Hence the conversion to other religions started. The activities of Christian missionaries, which are helping the poor are resulting in conversions to Christianity. A lot of dalits have converted to Christianity during last few centuries i.e., since the advent of British power in India. The point is that their work among the poor is increasingly felt to be an attack on upper caste hegemony. Hence the recent spate of attacks need to be viewed in a broader perspective, as not just flagrant violations of religious freedom, which is serious enough, but as an assault on the struggles of the poor and the marginalized fighting for a more just and humane society free from the shackles of the caste system. Similarly many dalits have converted to Islam, which is by all means is a noble religion because of its deep faith in universal brotherhood. When the dalits of Meenakshipuram of Tamil Nadu converted to Islam, there was a sudden change in the attitude of the upper castes towards them. Now they could enter village teashop, could wear shoes, something that was not possible earlier. In this way Islam gave these dalits a new sense of identity pride. Moreover, it being a foreign religion, many dalits hesitate to embrace it. Therefore it cannot be a prescription for dalits.

Ultimately they turned their eyes toward Buddhism, under the leadership of Ambedkar. By embracing Buddhism there will be unity amongst dalits as they will become one by losing caste identity. It improved their social status. It gave them confidence, which could lead to economic and spiritual progress. Therefore, for the emancipation of dalits, embracing Buddhism appears to be the ultimate solution.

Dr. Ambedkar's mission was to free the downtrodden from the yolk of slavery accorded by the previous caste system. After several attempts to organise reform movements and after having failed to move the upper castes, he came to the conclusion that the Hindu religion was not capable of giving spiritual salvation nor was the rigid caste system capable of providing social equality and dignity to the oppressed masses. His solution then was to free his people and offer them a new path a new religion which would provide both solace and respect human dignity. Thus his search for an alternate religion led him towards the teaching of Lord Buddha.

7. Conclusion

To conclude it may be said that the movement towards conversion to other religions clearly a movement designed to obtain a new identity, a better status and an acceptance by the society by the lower castes. Some studies show that neo-Buddhism did not make a deep impact on the lives of the ex-untouchables. However, these studies were conducted when the movement was still in its infancy, during the 1950s and 1960's when these who were studied were the first generation converts. They had converted only with the hope of achieving something better. Hence, many did not understand the basics of the new religion they had adopted. However, today the new generation of educated Buddhists has come up. They fully understand the basics of the religion. They are urban oriented and are looking better jobs. Even the villages in India are no longer as backward as isolated as they were fifty years ago. The wind of social change has brought about socio-cultural and economic changes in rural areas. Today there is every need to understand and assess the impact and results of conversions on socio-economic life of new generation of scheduled castes. Hence this study is an attempt in that direction.

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