

Original Article

From Conversion to Constitutional Recognition: Struggle of Neo-Buddhists for Equality and Rights

Dr. Janardan Kamble

Head, Department of History &
Associate Professor, In- Principal
Vasanta Naik College
Murud-Janjira-Raigad, 402401

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The historic mass conversion to Buddhism led by B. R. Ambedkar in 1956, a landmark event in modern Indian history that marked a profound socio-religious transformation among the Scheduled Castes. In the aftermath of conversion, the Government of India withdrew educational and economic benefits previously available to Scheduled Castes, citing constitutional provisions that restricted such entitlements to those professing Hinduism. This policy shift created significant challenges for the newly converted Neo-Buddhists, for whom these provisions were essential instruments of social and economic mobility. The study explores the sustained constitutional and political struggle undertaken by Neo-Buddhists, primarily under the leadership of the Republican Party of India, to secure the continuation of reservation benefits and welfare measures. Through petitions, memoranda, and organized agitations, Neo-Buddhists engaged in a prolonged campaign to assert their rights within the constitutional framework. The article highlights how these efforts contributed to influencing government policy and ultimately led to the recognition of Buddhists as a constitutionally acknowledged group eligible for certain protections and benefits. By analysing this movement, the article underscores the intersection of religion, caste, and state policy in India, and reflects on the broader implications of conversion as a strategy for social justice and equality.

Key Words: Buddhism, Scheduled Castes, Constitutional, Social Justice

Introduction

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The history of Dalits in Indian society is characterized by centuries of exclusion, discrimination, and systemic oppression rooted in the practice of untouchability. For nearly two thousand years, Dalits were denied basic rights and dignity across social, economic, religious, and political spheres. In this context, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar emerged as a transformative leader who reshaped the struggle for equality. Between 1920 and 1935, he led organized movements against caste discrimination, advocating self-respect, self-reliance, and direct action. Significant agitations such as the Mahad Chavdar Tank Satyagraha and the Nasik Kalaram Temple Entry movement highlighted the demand for civil rights while exposing entrenched social resistance. Responding to such pressures, the British government, through the Government of India Act, 1935, recognized marginalized communities as Scheduled Castes and introduced safeguards. This framework was later constitutionalized under Articles 366(24) and 341, culminating in the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Conversion to Buddhism

The Mass conversion to Buddhism by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar with his number of followers is phenomenal in Modern Indian History. On October 13, 1956, at Yeola Conference he publically announced that if it was not better to abjure the Hindu Fold, then to embrace some other faith that would give an equal status, a secure position and rightful treatment. In this matter Dr. B.R. Ambedkar said that unfortunately for him he was born a Hindu Untouchable, which was beyond his power to prevent, but assured not to die a Hindu. The Suppressed and oppressed Untouchables have no time to wait. They waited and suffered for centuries. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and his lakhs of followers embraced Buddhism with its democratic and egalitarian ideals, on the Vijaya Dashami in 1956.¹ Buddhism was again revived and the Lord Buddha returned to his native place.

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Address for correspondence:

Dr. Janardan Kamble, Head, Department of History & Associate Professor, In- Principal, Vasanta Naik College, Murud-Janjira-Raigad

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Reaction of the Society and Government to the Conversion

The Hindu society bitterly reacted by harassing Buddhist converts through social boycotts, assaults on their persons, and dire threats to their property and women folk in the Bombay State. Because of social boycott and other kind of harassment the entire life of Buddhist Community was in trouble. More to that, in the middle of 1957, after a period of about 9 months of the conversion movement the Government adopted reverse policy and took a decision to take very drastic steps against the Buddhists. The Decision then was taken to strip off the Converted Buddhists of all the Constitutional safeguards provided in the Constitution of India. On August 20, 1957 the then Home Minister Late Mr. G. B. Pant stated the legal position in this matter in the Indian Parliament. He said, "An Act passed by this Parliament that notwithstanding anything contained in paragraph(2) no person who professes a religion different from Hindu or Sikh religion shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled caste".ⁱⁱ

Objectives:

To study examines the socio-historical roots of caste oppression and the rise of the Dalit movement under Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. To analyse the 1956 Buddhist conversion as a strategy for equality, investigates post-conversion constitutional challenges. To evaluates the role of the Republican Party of India. To assesses protest methods, policy outcomes, and the broader relationship between religion, caste, and state policy in advancing social justice.

Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative, historical, and analytical approach to examine Neo-Buddhist movements. It draws on parliamentary debates, government reports, official documents, petitions, and speeches. Using an interpretative framework. It situates the movement within themes of social justice, constitutional rights, and identity politics to assess its broader socio-political significance.

Struggle of Neo-Buddhists

Neo-Buddhists under the banner of Republican Party of India (the Party conceived by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and formed after his sad demise started struggle to regain the safeguards provided in the constitution of India. Members of Parliament of the Republican Party of India and other leaders fought in and out of the Parliament for the cause of Buddhists for their reservation benefits.

To defend the interests of Buddhist Converts on November 29, 1957, Mr. B. C. Kamble moved a Resolution on the floor of Lok Sabha. That, "All the constitutional safeguards except those relating to the reservation of seats in the legislature, granted and provided to the Scheduled castes, be extended to the Buddhist converts from the Scheduled Castes and recommends that Government should bring suitable legislation to amend the Constitution, if necessary."ⁱⁱⁱ

While explaining the conditions of the Scheduled Castes people Mr. B.C. Kamble said that they had no land, no trade, and no influence in the administration and had no independent means of livelihood. On the top of it they embraced the recourse of Lord Buddha, the path of light and enlightenment, but they were socially boycotted. 'In a number of villages social boycott was in full swing, merely on the ground that they got converted to Buddhism and consequently, they refused to do the menial or dirty works that they used to do previously as Untouchables'.^{iv} Therefore, Mr. B. C. Kamble requested the Government to consider and view this matter reasonably.

Advocating the case of Neo-Buddhist for their constitutional safeguards Mr. B.C. Kamble gave the instance of 'Caste Disabilities Removal Act of 1850 by which a change of caste and change of religion was made absolutely permissible'.^v Mr.B.C. Kamble then pointed out the position of relation between religion and any right including political rights in other countries. Mr. Kamble also convinced by stating provisions in the Constitutions of various countries like Switzerland, Germany, Yugoslavia, and Finland that there was no relationship whatever between any right and the religious faith. Mr. Kamble also gave the reference of a letter from hon. Prime Minister dated July 31, 1957 stating that, "As you know, it is not possible to change the Constitution without going through certain elaborate process. If, however, the Government violate the Constitution even for good purposes the matter would go to the high court and the Supreme Court".^{vi} Mr. Kamble said that it was the crux of the problem, not because of their Buddhistness but because of discrimination against it.

On the question of placing the Buddhist in the schedule, Mr. B. C. Kamble said that they may be scheduled as Buddhists, so long as the other castes have not been converted to the Buddhist faith. He noticed the Government of two factors would happen if the Government rejects the said resolution they would be exposed to oppression and Buddhist community might develop into a kind of nationality. Mr. Kamble warned that if political oppression continued, it would take such a turn into the development of that nationality. He hoped that the Government and honorable House would help all the communities to hold in self-respect their heads erect.

Supporting the resolution moved by Mr. B.C. Kamble regarding safeguards for Neo-Buddhists, Mr. S. K. Dighe said, "Our Constitution guarantees equality among people but really speaking, our present Government has failed to achieve the goal of abolition of Untouchability. When Government failed or was unable to redress their grievances, they have tried themselves to remove the so called barriers of the caste system in the present day society by embracing Buddhism."^{vii} Mr. S.K. Dighe further said that one crore of people embraced Buddhism and their number was increasing day by day, Still they were in minority and therefore they needed protection. Being minority in every village the caste Hindus oppressed. Concluding his speech Mr. Dighe warned that if Government did not take any steps to safeguard the interests of the neo-Buddhists and give those facilities and privileges which they hitherto enjoyed, there

would be a lot of heart-burning and discontent among one section of the society, which would be injurious to the society as a whole.

On February 13, 1958, Mr. Datta Katti while taking part in the discussion on the problems of Scheduled Castes said no sincere efforts were made to kill this monster of Untouchability. The Scheduled Castes, by scientifically and deeply thinking over the problem of Untouchability had devised a way out and embraced Buddhism under the leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. The conversion would bring far-reaching effects upon the mental, moral and social growth of these people. Besides that, they required the facilities what they enjoyed under earlier. But the conversion gave rise to some problems. The Government withdrew all the facilities, they were enjoying. Secondly, the Buddhists converts were subjected to harassment.^{viii} The conversion movement of the Buddhists instead of being encouraged it was discouraged and suppressed.^{ix} They changed their religion, but there was no change in their economic condition. They were economically backward as other Scheduled Castes. The change of religion did not give them any material gain; therefore, all the facilities expect the political reservations which they enjoyed as member of the Scheduled Castes be continued to them, not considering their conversion to Buddhism. He convinced the House that 'if those facilities were discontinued, then the conversion movement would go on ceaselessly and if attitude of the Government continued the Buddhists would one day be forced to agitate for that purpose.'^x Mr. D.A Katti Further said that the Scheduled Castes and Buddhists tried on their own way to uproot the glaring social inequalities. Therefore, the Government must strengthen their hands.

On April 14, 1961, the Resolution regarding the safeguards for Buddhist converts was again placed on the floor of the Lok Sabha House by Mr. D.A. Katti that the event of conversion to Buddhism in Buddha's own land was an unparalleled in the history of the world. Buddhism that brought greatness to India disappeared from India although it spread across the whole of the world. The decline of Buddhism was the most unfortunate event in the history of India. The mass conversion movement to Buddhism by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was significant and prophetic. It was providential that the Scheduled Castes took initiative in bringing back Lord Buddha and his Dhamma to the country by accepting his religion. Everyone in India loves Buddha. Mr. D.A. Katti said, 'the principles of Panchsheel have formed the basis of our foreign policy'.^{xi} The national flag of India enshrined Buddha's Dharma Chakra. Therefore, it was thought that the Government would welcome heartily that Buddhist movement and extend its encouragement to that. Unfortunately, the contrary happened and all expectations were wrecked. In the State of Maharashtra and in some parts of Mysore where Scheduled Caste people converted to Buddhism, were subjected to harassment.

Mr. Katti further said," the memorandum was presented to Prime Minister. While responding to the memorandum Prime Minister wrote, 'for this purpose the constitution had to be changed and the Constitution cannot be changed for any purpose'.^{xii} Mr. Katti further said that thereafter, the Government issued a circular treating all Buddhist converts as Backward Classes and providing facilities given to the Backward Classes. Mr. D. A. Katti further told Lok Sabha that, "very recently, the Government of Maharashtra has declared the extension of these safeguards, the constitutional safeguards, to the Buddhists on May 1, 1960".^{xiii} Mr. D. A. Katti further said the example of Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Mr. Y.B. Chavan was before the Government of India. The Constitution did not come in the way of Mr. Chavan, likewise, the Constitution should not come in the way of Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru.

Mr. N.R Ghosh, one of the Lok Sabha members, opposed the resolution moved by Mr. D. A. Katti. Mr. Ghosh said that 'the main question, divorced of all emotions and heat, is whether the Scheduled Castes who changed their religion should, through the back door, be allowed to rejoin the Scheduled caste again'.^{xiv} According to Mr. Ghosh the basic Principle of making certain reservation in respect of Scheduled castes was the sin of Untouchability in Indian society. Due to Untouchability, people were handicapped. All sorts of promotional activities for their education and economic wellbeing were stopped. Mr. Ghosh further said that millions and millions of people perhaps who belonged to the Scheduled castes embraced Islam or Christianity and all these people would come and say, that though being Muhammadans and Christians, but still belonged to the Scheduled Castes. It was contradiction, illogical and unfair term. It threatened our integration and the resolution would widen its scope. Mr. Ghosh further said, "If the resolution is to be followed, then all the millions of Muhammadans and Christians also could claim the same privileges".^{xv} Then Mr. Ghosh said that if the resolution was accepted it would open a flood-gate and would be impossible to stop the claims of the innumerable people who had been out of Hinduism. The legislation had been passed against the Untouchability and that would disappear in course of time.

Mr. B.K. Gaikwad opposed the view of Mr. Ghosh and said that "Neo-Buddhists were weaker section, and as such, they should be given these benefits, and not because they are Buddhists."^{xvi} Mr. Narayan Das expressing his views on the Resolution regarding safeguards to neo-Buddhists said that "if what is provided for the Scheduled Castes may apply to the Sikh religion, they must also apply to those who join Buddhism or any other religion".^{xvii} Mr. Das suggested that the desirability of such advantage going to those who just leave the Hindu Religion and join other religion should also be considered. Mr. B.K. Gaikwad supporting the resolution regarding safeguards of Neo-Buddhists said, "Many people in this House, as well as outside, seem to have some misunderstandings in this matter".^{xviii} On the historical ground the concessions were given to the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Weaker Sections of the people and they were most downtrodden and backward educationally, economically, socially and in every respect. The Scheduled Caste People were Untouchables and original inhabitants of the country. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes

remained backward in all respect and. Scheduled Castes were being treated as Untouchables. Scheduled Castes people embraced Buddhism in order to improve their social, religious and other conditions and they were trying to become perfect human being and that was their aim.

“The stigma of Untouchability is being observed even after conversion and therefore, they have every right to demand the concession”.^{xix}

Mr. B.K. Gaikwad expressed that those who were treated as Untouchables were entitled to get those concessions. He further made it clear that so far as the resolution regarding safeguards of Neo-Buddhist was concerned, there were certain Constitutional difficulties. The Constitution was for the people and the people were not for the Constitution. If people suffered, then an amendment to the Constitution was essential. In the end, Mr. B.K. Gaikwad said Mr. P. S. Daulata supporting the resolution said the aim of the resolution is that the concessions that Scheduled Castes are getting, it should not cease on account of religion.^{xx}

On August 19, 1965 Mr. B.P. Maurya on the floor of Lok Sabha said that the grievance of New-Buddhists was frequently placed, but no firm steps had been taken. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes who embraced Buddhism were victim of inequality even day. The Buddhist converts from Maharashtra were given facilities by their government what they were getting as earlier Scheduled Castes and Tribes. “To continue this on national level Republican Party had carried on a struggle and more than two lakhs Buddhists were imprisoned”.^{xxi} Mr. B.P. Maurya requested the House that Prime Minister Mr. Lal Bahaddur Shastri promised to continue all previous facilities and therefore, Government should make positive mind and apply the decision to continue facilities immediately.

By 1957 Republican Party of India in Maharashtra emerged as strong political force pledged to fight for the rights of downtrodden masses; improve their economic, social, educational and political status of these people; and bring them to the level of others. The massive Landless Labourers Satyagraha Launched by Republican Party of India convinced On October 17, 1959 the Chief Minister, Mr. Yashwantrao Chavan to accept demand of distribution of land to the landless and to give benefits of reservation policy to converted Buddhists.^{xxii} Next to that Republican Party of India started nationwide agitation with its 10 point Demands from 6 December 1964 February 4, 1965.^{xxiii} Among them one point was Extension of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes privileges to the converted Buddhists. Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri pursued Republican Party to withdraw Satyagraha by accepting Buddhist demand principally and assured that the Government would implement some demands immediately and some demands later on at convenient time.^{xxiv} In 1990 in the Parliament, while stating the object and reason for proposing to include Buddhists of Scheduled Caste origin in the list of Scheduled Castes, Ram Vilas Paswan, then Union Minister of Welfare and Labour, made clear that “Neo-Buddhists are a religious group which has come into existence in 1956 as a result of a wave of conversion of Scheduled Caste under the leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Upon conversion to Buddhism they became ineligible for statutory concession and facilities available to the Scheduled Castes to them also. On the grounds that change of religion has not altered their social and economic conditions...As they objectively deserve to be treated as the Scheduled Castes....”

The problem of Buddhists Reservation remained unsolved decades further instead of continues efforts Dalit leaders. Republican Party of India has been unsuccessful in electoral politics after 1970. Therefore the Party was could not force Buddhist demand in Parliament. After 1980s the voting performance of Congress was gradually slowing down. Before the general election of 1990 both Congress Party and Janata Dal understood importance of Republican Party of India as pressure group in electoral politics and followed different methods to persuade Republican Party to have election alliance. Meanwhile, ‘Prime Minister V.P. Sing of Janata Dal on January 15 1990 declared all central Government facilities to Neo-Buddhists and converted Dalits and also implementation of Mandal Commission Report.^{xxv} Sikh Dalits protested to be included in Constitution (Scheduled Caste) Order 1950 and got after six years of denial of their birth, fundamental and constitutional rights of being Scheduled Caste origin converted to Sikhism. They were listed in Presidential SC/ST Order 1950 by amending Para 3 of Article 341 in 1956. But, Buddhist Dalits were denied of their right for more than 42 years until the Para 3 of Article 341 was amended in 1990 to include Scheduled Caste people converted to Buddhism.

Conclusion

The conversion of Dalits to Buddhism, inspired by the leadership of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, marked a significant transformation in their quest for dignity and self-respect. While this religious shift successfully instilled a renewed sense of identity and self-esteem, it did not immediately translate into substantial material or economic advancement. Consequently, the Neo-Buddhist community continued to seek the benefits of reservation policies that they had previously enjoyed as Scheduled Castes. Under the banner of the Republican Party of India, they sustained a prolonged struggle spanning over four decades to reclaim these entitlements. In Maharashtra, where the movement had deep historical roots and strong organizational support, Neo-Buddhists were able to exert considerable pressure on the state government, achieving partial success in advancing their demands.

However, at the national level, the limited electoral success of Dalit political formations delayed substantive policy outcomes for many years. Ultimately, the acceptance of the demands of converted Buddhists appears to have been driven as much by political expediency as by the principles of social justice. This underscores the complex interplay between social movements, political power, and policy-making in modern India.



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- ⁱ Ambedkar B.R., The Buddha and his Dhamma, Siddhart Publication, Bombay, 1957, p.xiii
- ⁱⁱ Kamble B.C. , a Case of Indian Buddhist, Printed and Published by Kamble B.C., Worali, Bombay, May 1965,p.11
- ⁱⁱⁱ Lok Sabha Debates, November 29, 1957, p.3023
- ^{iv} Lok Sabha Debates, November 29, 1957, p.3024
- ^v Ibid, p.3026
- ^{vi} Ibid,p.3029
- ^{vii} Lok Sabha Debates, November29, 1957,pp.3036-37
- ^{viii} Lok Sabha Debate, February 13, 1958, p.727
- ^{ix} Lok Sabha Debate, February 14, 1958, pp.832-33
- ^x Ibid, p834
- ^{xi} Ibid, p.11485
- ^{xii} Ibid, p.11488
- ^{xiii} Ibid, p.11489
- ^{xiv} Lok Sabha Debate, April 14,1961, p.11501
- ^{xv} Ibid, p.11502
- ^{xvi} Ibid, p.11505
- ^{xvii} Ibid, p.14461
- ^{xviii} Lok Sabha Debate, April28, 1961,p.14461
- ^{xix} Ibid, p.14463
- ^{xx} Ibid, p.14469
- ^{xxi} Lok Sabha Debate, August 19, 1966,p.5799
- ^{xxii} Prabudh Bharat. October 24, 1959
- ^{xxiii} Prabudh Bharat, February 6, 1965,
- ^{xxiv} Speech by Mr. B.K. Gaikwad, President of Republican Party of India on the occasion of the 5th Session of the RPI held at Delhi, on 1st May, 1966, p. 3
- ^{xxv} Shirwale Chandan, Yodha,p. 70