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Conversion: The Buddhist Way

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Abstract: December 1998 witnessed a growing spate of atrocities against the Christians in several areas across India. The most gruesome were perhaps in the Dangs district of the Gujarat State. It is common knowledge that these were related to the acceptance of Christianity by a good number of tribals in South Gujarat. The Prime Minister of the country then visited the area. At a press conference on the occasion, he called for a national debate on conversion, namely, the acceptance of other religions by the Indians giving up the religion in which they were born. Much has been written since on the issue. The context of conversion is mostly Hinduism and its entrenched caste system. It is often claimed that the hierarchical order of Hindu society, *varna-ashrama dharma*, is sanctioned by the Hindu religious scriptures. The Hindu society has not only the four varnas, priests (Brahmins), warriors/rulers (Kshatriyas), business/dealers (Vaishyas) and the menial workers/artisans (Shudras), but also the out-casts whose services to society are so menial and polluting as disposing of dead animals, cleaning of sewers etc. Their jobs are regarded as polluting, and their presence is capable of polluting the caste Hindus. Hence, they are classified into a fifth group, the Untouchables.

Keywords: Buddhism, Conversion, Varna, Tribals, Ambedkar

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Conversion: The Buddhist Way

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December 1998 witnessed a growing spate of atrocities against the Christians in several areas across India. The most gruesome were perhaps in the Dangs district of the Gujarat State. It is common knowledge that these were related to the acceptance of Christianity by a good number of tribals in South Gujarat. The Prime Minister of the country then visited the area. At a press conference on the occasion, he called for a national debate on conversion, namely, the acceptance of other religions by the Indians giving up the religion in which they were born. Much has been written since on the issue.

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topography of an Indian village their dwellings were outside the village, away from the caste Hindus. They were subject to many disadvantages, like the prohibition on drawing water from the village well used by caste Hindus. Perhaps the anthropological justification for one to be born in such groups could not have been more outrageous, namely, that it is one's deeds that merit such a birth. Denial of social mobility for such despised of society was enshrined in one's bounden duty (*svadharma*) to carry on the services of one's caste or outcaste. Mercifully, the Indian Constitution abolished this inhuman practice.

Further, religion in India has served as a galvanising force for nationalism.¹ Its militant version advocated by Savarkar or Tilak has now been adopted by the Sangh Parivar, the umbrella organisation for the ultra right-wing nationalism of the Bharatiya Janata Party, or the moderate type by Mahatma Gandhi. The secularists respected the religion of the individual and communities, but did not wish to have any state religion.

The issue of conversion was a thorn in the side of the Hindu society. It was so not only in modern and contemporary India, but quite early in the history of this civilization when critical thinkers like Siddharth Gautam, the

Buddha, appeared from within the Hindu society. The Buddha, judging by the Sermons/Suttas attributed to him, available to us in the Pali canon, was a rebel who critiqued Hindu customs and institutions and challenged them to become a new, humane society. The Hindu polity has been subjected to such challenges from without as well. The coming of the Muslims was a serious affront when most Hindu rulers were replaced by the invaders, especially in north India. It was also a time when Hindus in the north embraced Islam in relatively large numbers. The dropping of anchor by the East India Company at India's shores led to a commercial turmoil. The transfer to the British Crown, after the initial resistance in 1857, would change the scene yet again. The arrival of Christian missionaries began to affect mostly, though not only, the periphery of Indian society. Opting for the Christian religion was again an issue.

In this article, it is not my intention to look at this range of developments on conversion in the Indian history. It is to the teaching of the Buddha that I turn to. The Awakened One's critique may awaken a civilization to be new and humane. The challenge is echoed in our times too. Dr B.R. Ambedkar reflects on *Why Go For Conversion?* Babasaheb, as he is affectionately named by his followers, accepted the Buddha's Dhamma. He had earlier in 1935 declared his intention for conversion, namely, that he was born a Hindu, but would not die a Hindu.

Some Indicators of Conversion

If for a moment we look a little away from the Indian scene, we notice

some indicators of conversion. Religious conversion in antiquity was marked by a change of name. In the book of Genesis of the Old Testament in the Bible, Abram is given a new name, Abraham, by God. Similarly, his wife Sarai's name is changed to Sarah.² In the New Testament of the Bible, Jesus did change the name of Simon to Peter. The suggestion is that the new name is divinely bestowed.

When Indians accepted Christianity or Islam, we notice that in the earlier period of conversion, the converts accepted a change of names. Among the Christians it would be mostly biblical or European names. In the context of the renewed understanding of culture, converts to Christianity nowadays retain their Indian names. A practice is also prevalent to translate the Christian names into Indian languages. In early Buddhism there does not seem to be any significant change of name. Even the criminal, Angulimala, whose name suggests that he wore a garland of the small fingers of his victims, after his conversion on hearing the word of the Buddha, did not change his name. Among the recent converts to Buddhism, however, a study has found that names such as Ashok, Milind, Siddharth, Gautam, Rahul, Sumedh are indicative of the affinity to the Buddhist culture and tradition.³ They are conscious that as Buddhists they have an identity and that their identity is separate from that of the Hindus.⁴

The Buddha and Conversion

The very first converts to the teaching of the Buddha were the five ascet-

ics, his former companions. He found them in the Deer Park, Isipatana, at Benares (modern Sarnath at Varanasi). He preached to them the first sermon about the Middle Path.⁵ Thereby he set rolling the Wheel of Dhamma.⁶ The five ascetics accepted his teaching and were received as his followers.

The Buddha went about sharing his insight for about 45 years. He gathered a large band of followers. His instruction to them is available in his mission command:

Go out, O disciples, and travel from place to place for the welfare of many people, for the joy of many people, in pity for the world, for the blessing, welfare, and joy of gods and men. Go not in twos to one place. Preach, O disciples, Dhamma, the beginning of which is noble, the middle of which is noble and the end of which is noble, in spirit and in letter. Preach the whole and full, pure path of holiness.

King Ashoka became the greatest Buddhist missionary in history. Under his patronage Buddhism became the religion of India. He had accepted the Theravada Buddhism. It was carried to Sri Lanka, beyond to Burma, and to Far East Asia. In all those lands and cultures, Buddhism was accepted by many disciples. It gained many converts. It is often noted in the Pali literature that the earliest followers of the Buddha were mainly from among the ranks of the Brahmans, nobles and wealthy merchant classes.⁷

The Buddha's Teaching

In the first Sermon of the Buddha, there is reference to the Eightfold Middle Path. Each of the eight aspects

is prefaced as *Samma*, generally translated as right. The first is *Samma Ditthi*, that is, view. It is in contrast to *Kuditthi* or *Miccha Ditthi*, false view, groundless or unfounded opinion. In the case of the *Samma Ajiva*, right livelihood, the Commentary on the *SuttaNipata* observes that "having given up the wrong mode of gaining a living, one must move forward with the right mode of livelihood only".⁸ With the adherence to the right view, there is a clear teaching to give up the groundless or unfounded view. It seems to be the Buddha's call to conversion.

In the *Brahmajala Sutta* of the *Digha Nikaya* there is an exposition of wrong views. There are sixty-two kinds of wrong views held by the Samanas and Brahmans. We may cite just one of those that is related to eternity. It understands that the soul as well as the world is eternal and unchanging. The Buddha, in contrast, teaches the true view that compounded reality is changing, impermanent, touched with pain, suffering and is devoid of 'self'. The sense of conversion in this case is to accept the right view or the well founded teaching of the Buddha.

In the *Vasala Sutta* of the *SuttaNipata*, the fire worshipping Brahman, Bharadvaja reviles the Buddha. He calls him an outcaste (*Vasala*). At which the Awakened One asks of the former if he knows an outcaste or the cause of becoming an outcaste. He confesses that he does not know. The Teacher then preaches to him a sermon indicating who an outcaste is. Thereby he demolishes the principle of caste differences. He concludes that it is not by birth but

by action that one is really an outcaste or a Brahman. Bharadvaja is convinced of the Buddha's view and converts, accepting to be a devotee (*upasaka*) of the Awakened One. We come across other instances too of conversion to the Buddha's Dhamma.

In the *Mahavagga*,⁹ we have the stories of the conversion of Sariputta and Moggallana. They later became the chief disciples of the Master.¹⁰

Buddhist Notion of Sarana

Conversion in Buddhism is indicated by one taking refuge (*sarana*) in the Buddha, Dhamma, and in the Sangha. It is the understanding among the Buddhists that the movement into refuge represents "a new relationship which was the consequence of a profoundly personal reorientation of one's life".¹¹ The "going to take refuge" (*saranam gacchami*) is interpreted in the commentarial literature as a movement, as an activity of knowing, of understanding.¹² A convert to Buddhism seeks to take refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, and the Sangha. The community of the converts are those who have heard and accepted the teaching of the Buddha (*savakka*). The community of the Buddhist monks and the nuns too is regarded as the hearers of the word of the Buddha.

The Buddha had a vision of an alternative society. He wanted a society devoid of the castes and rituals of Brahmanism. His vision appealed to many. It was accepted as the right worldview where all were equal and women had their rightful place. Buddhist Scriptures are replete with conversion stories.¹³

In his own lifetime the Buddha had a large following. The missionary effort continued down the centuries after him. In our time we have witnessed a movement of mass conversions to the Buddha's dispensation under the leadership of Dr B.R. Ambedkar.

Dr Ambedkar and Conversion

Dr B. R. Ambedkar was a leader of the downtrodden depressed classes of people in India. He was born in a Mahar family, one of the untouchable groups in the State of Maharashtra. He was fully aware of the pitiable plight of the untouchables in the Hindu society. He is regarded as the Father of the Indian Constitution. He was the first Minister of Law of Independent India. He was aware that even in such high places he carried the stigma of being an 'untouchable'. He was resolved not to die a Hindu. The historic conversion of Dr. Ambedkar with 75,000 of his followers took place in Nagpur on October 14, 1956. A profound insight into the Indian psyche that Dr Ambedkar had is recorded:¹⁴

As a social scientist and a man of the masses, he knew the tremendous influence of the Hindu religion. Therefore, Marxism with its strong accent on atheism will not attract the illiterate masses. Religious solution alone can save the Untouchables.

Since then, the insight is vindicated. In the 1991 Census of India, the Buddhists in India number 6.4 millions.¹⁵

The pre-understanding of Dr Ambedkar's hermeneutics of conversion cannot be grasped without first examining the beginning, the nature, and

the practice of untouchability in the real life of India's Untouchables. The context of the social life of the untouchables is known by recalling the stories of atrocities perpetrated against them. There is a class struggle whenever the downtrodden begin to claim "equal treatment with others".

Untouchability is not a temporary phenomenon. The Hindus believe that Hinduism is an eternal/permanent (*sanatana dharma*) religion. The struggle of the untouchables is long-standing. Dr Ambedkar's hermeneutics of conversion breaks through the struggle for a new society, a Kingdom of Righteousness. He understands that the purpose of religion according to the Buddha is threefold, namely, to help human beings to attain the Kingdom of Righteousness by righteous conduct in relation to others; to train the human mind, instincts and dispositions; and to infuse courage to stand, alone too, when necessary, by what is right.¹⁶

Dr Ambedkar's hermeneutics of conversion focuses on the strength needed for individuals and community to survive the struggle. Life in the world revolves round three types of strength, namely, manpower, finance and mental strength. He assessed that the manpower of the downtrodden is low and demoralised due to abject poverty. Their financial strength is negligible. Mentally, their self-image and identity is battered by the insults and tyranny their stories are replete with. He concluded that Hindu society does not seek to strengthen them or empower them. Their existence in the present society will perpetuate their meaningless exist-

ence. He suggests that they secure the needed strength from outside. But how? Either by establishing close relations with some other society, or joining some other religion. His conclusion: "[i]t clearly means you must leave your present religion and assimilate yourselves with other society".¹⁷ He maintained that "[f]or annihilating castes and untouchability from among the Untouchables, change of religion is the only antidote".¹⁸ He understands that through conversion change of religion is followed by a change of name which bestows a new identity. The purpose of the hermeneutics of conversion can be stated in Dr Ambedkar's own words:¹⁹

To get human treatment, convert yourselves.

Convert for getting organised.

Convert for becoming strong.

Convert for securing equality.

Convert for getting liberty.

Convert so that your domestic life may be happy.

Conclusion

The biography of a person seems at most times to be the best introduction to his/her thought. The Buddha presented his view of a new society. Many accepted it giving up their native persuasions. He shook the Hindu community of his birth almost to its roots. His legacy was accepted by Emperor Ashoka. His social teaching was proclaimed from the much acclaimed Ashokan pillars and through his sending of missions to other lands of South Asia. Modern India has wisely accepted the Wheel of the Buddha's Dhamma and placed it at the centre of the Republic's

Flag. The hermeneutics of conversion that Dr Ambedkar's thought presents us with is the story of a leader of the down-trodden untouchables in search of respect, equality and freedom. He has manifested the 'missionary' zeal of a visionary to challenge his people to a new way of life through conversion.

Notes

1. Robert F. Spencer (Ed.), *Religion and Change in Contemporary Asia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1972) is a good source to study the issue. It deals with the major religions and countries of Asia.
2. G.H.R. Horsley, "Name Change as an Indication of Religious Conversion in Antiquity", *Numen*, Vol.34 (1987), p.7, rightly observes that the change does not actually indicate any difference in those names.
3. Ramesh H. Kamble, "Social Meanings of Conversion: To Buddhism among Nav-Bouddhas", *Indian Missiological Review*, Vol.17 (1995), p.28.
4. *Ibid.*, p.29.
5. *Mahavagga* I, 6-10.
6. See Dr H. Oldenberg, *Buddha*, London: Williams and Norgate, 1882, pp. 125-31. It has a valuable description and discussion of the Sermon.
7. In the *Vasettha Sutta*, we have the story of a Brahman convert ridiculed by fellow Brahmans.
8. *Micchajivan hitva sammajivan eva pavattayi* - SnA 382.
9. I. 23
10. See Henry C. Warren, *Buddhism in Translations*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993, pp. 87-91.
11. John Ross Carter, "The Notion of Refuge (*sarana*) in the Theravada Buddhist Tradition" in the *The Threefold Refuge in the Theravada Buddhist Tradition*, edited by J.R. Carter *et al.*, Chambersburg, PA: Anima Books, 1982, p.2.
12. See J.R. Carter, *op.cit.*, p.6. He has some valuable considerations on the going for *lokiya* (mundane) and *lokuttara* (transcendental) refuge as mentioned in the Theravada Buddhist literature. The other sections of the book deal with the Buddha as Refuge, Dhamma as Refuge and the Sangha as Refuge.
13. See Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha And His Dhamma*, Book II, for a collection of conversion narratives.
14. T. Rajshekar, *Ambedkar & His Conversion*, Bangalore: Dalit Sahitya Academy, 1983, p.26.
15. It is to be noted that the Tibetan Buddhist refugees are still citizens of their country. Some among them may have naturalized as Indian citizens.
16. B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha And His Dhamma* (Bombay: Siddharth Publication, 1974), Book III, Pt V, 31-33.
17. B. R. Ambedkar, *Why Go For Conversion?* (Bangalore: Dalit Sahitya Academy, 1987), p.16.
18. *Ibid.*, p.17.
19. *Ibid.*, p.22.

Conversion: Turning or Returning?

The Biblical Background of a Controversial Concept

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1. Introduction

Proselytising, that is trying to increase the number of the followers of a religion, is a common practice among the followers of many religions. This practice of necessity needs some sort of a justification. And this will be found either in the injunction of the religion's founder or in some text that is considered canonical or normative by the religious community, interpreted mostly in a fundamentalistic fashion. It is the aim of this paper to inquire into the biblical background, both in the Old and the New Testaments, of the so-called practice of 'conversion' among Christians in order to dispel some misconceptions or misunderstandings of the topic under discussion.

2. Concept of 'Conversion' in Ancient Israel

The idea of conversion is found among the prophets mainly of the pre-exilic period like Hoshea, First Isaiah and Jeremiah, as well as to a lesser extent in those of the post-exilic prophets like Joel. There is no teaching on 'conversion' as such among any of them. In fact the abstract words *shûbâ* or *t^eshûbâ* are quite rare in the Old Testament. Surprisingly the abstract word *š^mshûbâ* which is its opposite and is

translated as 'backsliding', 'faithlessness' or 'apostasy' is more common (cf. Jer 2:19; 3:22; 5:6; 8:5; 14:7; Hos 11:7; 14:4/5). But the root *shûb* occurs in various verbal forms in the OT with relative frequency (c.1050x), with a concentration in Jeremiah (111 x).¹ As the same lexicon tells us "*shûb* is basically a vb. of motion, with the meanings return, turn back, go back, come back, often in reference to physical motion of returning to a point of departure".² And so the verb has been given the theological meaning both of turning away from evil and a turning to or returning to God. W. L. Holladay in particular treats 154 passages, both verb and noun, where the theological use of the term is in question, in this sense and terms it the "covenantal usage".³ In other words, when the covenantal relationship with God is broken by sin, 'conversion' is a returning, in the sense of a reconciliation with the covenantal partner.

2.1. Conversion in Amos

This is the first time that we meet with the verb *shûb* in the sense of a returning to God in the Old Testament. In the words of Amos, Yahweh has been sending Israel quite tough warnings that she should return to him. Thus Yahweh