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ON 14 OCTOBER 1956, BR Ambedkar, seen here posing for a photograph with members of the Bharatiya Bouddha Jana Samiti, converted to Buddhism along with almost half a million followers. He had declared his intention to convert at the Depressed Classes Conference in Yeola, on 13 October 1935. Although he had been unable to prevent being born a Hindu untouchable, he said, "I solemnly assure you that I will not die a Hindu."

Over the next two decades, Ambedkar exhorted Dalits to leave Hinduism and studied several prominent religions. He eventually



commitment to social equality. On 23 September 1956, he announced that he would convert on Dussehra that year. Nagpur was chosen as the venue, he later said, not because it was the headquarters of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh but because it was named after the Nag people, who had resisted the Aryans and propagated the Buddha's teachings throughout the subcontinent.

The mass conversion, organised by the Bharatiya Bouddha Jana Samiti's Nagpur branch, was held at a ground near the Vaccine Institute, on South Ambazari Road. Anyone over the age of 18 could participate. The Indian Railways arranged a special train from Bombay, and all trains to Nagpur were full of attendees. The entry passes issued by the organisers were soon exhausted, and the event was declared open to all. After his own initiation by Mahasthavir Chandramani, the oldest Buddhist monk in the country, Ambedkar initiated his followers. Two days later, he converted a further three hundred thousand people at Chandrapur.

Ambedkar died on 6 December 1956. His book *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, published the following year, contained the tenets of what came to be known as Navayana Buddhism. According to the 2011 census, there are 7.3 million Navayana Buddhists, accounting for about eighty-seven percent of all Indian Buddhists.

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