Dr B. R. Ambedkar is probably more famous in India now than during his lifetime (1891–1956). He is known for two roles: as dynamic leader of the Untouchables and architect of the Indian Constitution. Shortly before his death he converted to Buddhism and this may be the most influential of all his leadership roles. He was not able to create any permanent organization in the two months between conversion and his death but his writing and the work of his followers has begun to produce change in a country in which Buddhism had disappeared before the modern period (see Figure 24.1).

Two movements in the late nineteenth century indicate a revival of Buddhism in South Asia. A Sri Lankan Bhikshu, Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933), established the Maha Bodhi Society in India in 1891, the year of B. R. Ambedkar’s birth. The chief task of the Maha Bodhi Society was to restore the Buddhist temple at Bodhgaya to Buddhist hands. Conversion was not on the agenda and most of those involved in the society were practising Hindus, usually of high caste. However, the Maha Bodhi journal served as a priceless mode of information for anyone interested in Buddhism.

In south India, in the same period, there was a flourishing of publications on Buddhism. The Essence of Buddhism (1907), by Lakshmi Narasu, was so meaningful to Ambedkar that he arranged for a reprint in 1948. Narasu and Pandit Iyothee Trass, his associate, represent a strong, high intellectual revival in the south (see Aloysius 1998; Perumal 1992). But this had weakened by the time Ambedkar was looking for information and support 30 years later.

Ambedkar’s first encounter with Buddhism has assumed almost a mythic quality. When Ambedkar passed the fourth Standard English exam, his community celebrated. A teacher at Wilson High School in Bombay presented him with his Marathi book on the life of the Buddha. Dada (K. A.) Keluskar knew Ambedkar’s father, Ramji Subedar, also a teacher and principal of an army school. He also knew the Gaikwad of Baroda, who was to become Ambedkar’s benefactor. He is representative of Maharashtrian intellectuals drawn to Buddhism.

Ambedkar went on to become one of the most highly educated men in the Marathi speaking area. He had a PhD from Columbia University, the equivalent from London’s School of Economics and also passed the English Bar examinations. He came back to his home area and began his work on the problems of the Untouchables.
Ambedkar was able to build on previous leadership. In the Marathi speaking area, two extraordinary Mahars made a real difference in preparing their people for change. In the Nagpur area, Kisan Fagoji Bansode (1879–1946) started schools, unions, newspapers, and called conferences. He was matched in the west by Shivram Janba Kamble (1875–1942). There were also reform efforts from higher castes. Vital Ramji Shinde (1873–1944), a Maratha, was extraordinarily able to build schools and curiously enough was interested in Buddhism. A nineteenth-century Mali, now known as Mahatma Phule, was an inspiration to Ambedkar and actually Ambedkar’s thought is sometimes called Phule-Ambedkar. Jyotirao Phule (1827–1890) was anti-caste, pro-education, a writer, an organizer, a creator of institutions that left their mark on Maharashtra. He was a high caste, as was Shinde, but that did not keep his thought from being very influential in the Ambedkar movement. Ambedkar would say that his three gurus are the Buddha, Mahatma Phule and Kabir, a Hindi Bhakti poet-saint his father was devoted to.

Ambedkar’s caste, the Mahar, was the largest Untouchable caste in the Marathi speaking area, composing about a tenth of the population. They were village servants with a number of responsibilities and duties. They did not do sanitation work like the Bhangis. Castes came from Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh to fill that function. Chamars worked with leather and Mangs made baskets and functioned as entertainers for the village. Basic to all Untouchables was agricultural labour. Dragging dead cattle out of the villages was the only clearly polluting work Mahars did; nevertheless they were not allowed in the temple or generally in the homes or streets of caste Hindus. In the modern period, many of their village servant functions were
performed by modern means such as the post office, leaving Mahars free and encouraged to enter new occupations, working in the mills and the docks. Most important, they also served in the British army; Ambedkar came from such a Mahar army family (see also Ahir 1964, 1982, 1995).

**Satyagrahas**

One of the most interesting aspects of the Ambedkar movement is his relationship to Mahatma Gandhi. In brief, Gandhi believed change of heart in caste Hindus was the necessary element in progress while Ambedkar held political and legal rights were essential. His reaction to the Vaikam Satyagraha illustrates the complexity of the situation.

One Gandhian Satyagraha important to the Ambedkar movement was at Vaikam in Kerala (1924–1925). It involved chiefly the Irava caste of Untouchables and it was an effort to secure the use of a road going around the temple at Vaikam. Ambedkar wrote about this Satyagraha:

For us, the most important event in the country today is the Satyagraha at Vaikam ... Most of you know what sort of debate is going on at Vaikam. The Untouchables of Vaikam insist that they should all be allowed to use a road which is used by all people and by animals as well. We are not much concerned with all the vacillation and compromise this protest has brought about. The fact to remember is this – that even after a whole year of protest, there is no result. It is true, of course, that some political leaders have changed their attitudes regarding the Satyagraha for it has been conclusively proved now that the argument of political before social is a worthless one ...

Before Mahatma Gandhi, no politician in this country maintained that it is necessary to remove social injustice here in order to do away with the tension and conflict, and that every Indian should consider it his sacred duty to do so. According to Mahatma Gandhi, social and political causes are not separate but are one and the same, and therefore he goes around telling people that independence cannot be achieved without Hindu–Muslim unity and the removal of untouchability.

However, if one looks more closely one finds that there is a slight disharmony between Mahatma Gandhi and untouchability, just as there is between Kasturba Gandhi and Lakshmi! For he does not insist on the removal of untouchability as much as he insists on the propagation of Khaddar or Hindu–Muslim unity. If he had he would have made the removal of untouchability a precondition for membership of the Congress as he made yarn spinning a precondition for voting in the party. Well, be that as it may, when one is spurned by everyone, even the sympathy shown by Mahatma Gandhi is of no little importance.

Zelliot 2013: 77–78

The Satyagraha seems to have ended with the moving of the road a little further from the temple.

After Ambedkar’s return in 1923 from his American and English study, he devoted his life to the movement of Untouchables. This included three Satyagrahas, the Gandhian term, even though all three were foreign to Gandhi and completely out of his compass. The first was in 1927 after the Government of Bombay decreed that all public places should be open to all castes. Ambedkar called a conference at Mahad, a small town south of Bombay, in the Ratnagari area. A tank (pond) was used by all caste Hindus in the little town. The mayor of
the town was very sympathetic to Ambedkar and had encouraged him to come. Ambedkar’s conference was held on Muslim land outside the city. A group of Ambedkar’s followers left the conference and drank water at the tank. They were chased away by Brahman s. Ambedkar called off the Satyagraha and fought in the courts for the right to use the water. The event was so meaningful to his caste that the saying ‘make a mahad’ indicated brave attempts at equality. There is now a college in Mahad. At a second conference, the Manusmriti, India’s classic law book with harsh penalties for Untouchables and women for overstepping their boundaries, was burned publicly. A Brahman associate of Ambedkar actually put the Manusmriti in the fire I am told.

The second Satyagraha Ambedkar participated in, although at a distance, was a 1929 effort to enter the Parvati temple which dominated Pune from a hill above the city. Privately owned, the law allowing public places being open to Untouchables did not apply. For several months groups of Untouchables from several castes would climb the hill at Parvati until blocked. There was some violence and the important Chambhar leader Rajbhoj was injured.

The Kalaram temple in Nasik was the site of a very important Satyagraha from 1930 to 1935. This time period included the Round Table Conferences in London that determined the future of India. Ambedkar was very much involved and there he fought for separate electorates for the Untouchables. The Satyagraha’s failure added strength to Ambedkar’s claim that Untouchables were separate from caste Hindus and should be so treated. Efforts to join in temple activities were constantly met with violence. Toward the end of 1935 a determination to leave Hinduism caused Ambedkar to announce that publicly. The announcement that he was leaving Hinduism was made in Yeola in Nasik District. The reaction of India’s various religions was both positive and negative. Most positive was that of the Sikhs who were not only welcoming but also went so far as to build Khalsa College in Bombay as a token of their commitment and to encourage Ambedkar to design and staff it. Some Christian leaders welcomed the idea of mass conversion; others were hesitant to involve such numbers. A Christian friend consulted Gandhi before coming to Ambedkar, which irritated him greatly. Most unusual was an Italian Buddhist monk, Lokanatha, who encouraged the idea of conversion. Lokanatha explained to Ambedkar that the Untouchables had been Buddhist before the Hindu revival of the Gupta period. He also presented Ambedkar with his writing on Buddhism.

Ambedkar’s call to change religion was often very strong, even bitter. This is understandable because for Ambedkar a combination of any religion with Hinduism was impossible. This made him a very harsh critic of Hinduism. Buddhism seemed to have become combined with most of the South Asian countries’ religions; in Tibet, the Bo; in Japan, Shinto and Buddhism share the field. In much of southeast Asia, ancestor worship is an important part of Buddhism. Ambedkar could not find any way in which Buddhism could be merged with Hinduism. A section of the speech on change of religion is so passionate it takes a poetic form.

Religion is for man; man is not for religion.
If you want to gain self-respect, change your religion.
If you want to create a cooperating society, change your religion.
If you want power, change your religion.
If you want independence, change your religion.
If you want to make the world in which you live happy, change your religion.
Why should you remain in a religion that does not respect your manhood?
Ambedkar's life and his Navayana Buddhism

Why should you remain in a religion that does not let you enter its temples? Why should you remain in a religion that does not give you water to drink? Why should you remain in a religion that does not let you become educated? Why should you remain in a religion that bars you from good jobs? Why should you remain in a religion that dishonors you at every step? That religion which forbids humanitarian behavior between man and man is not religion but a reckless penalty. That religion which regards the recognition of man’s self-respect as sin is not religion but a sickness. That religion which allows one to touch a foul animal but not a man is not a religion but a madness. That religion which says that one class may not gain knowledge, may not acquire wealth, may not take up arms, is not a religion but a mockery of man’s life. That religion which teaches that the unlearned should remain unlearned, that the poor should remain poor, is not a religion but a punishment. Do not say: men who treat animals with more respect than humans and who respect all Brahmans as gods are religious. Do not say: men who feed ants with sugar and let men go without water are religious. Do not say: men who embrace another religion and push their own far from them hate society.

Zelliot 2013: 154–155

Ambedkar said:

Because we have the misfortune of calling ourselves Hindus, we are treated thus. If we were members of another Faith, none would dare treat us so. Choose any religion which gives you equality of status and treatment. We shall repair our mistake now. I had the misfortune of being born with the stigma of an Untouchable. However, it is not my fault; but I will not die a Hindu, for this is in my power.

Zelliot 2013: 147

In May 1936 Ambedkar called an all Bombay district Mahar conference. This is the only time the caste identity was used. Meetings were held in the Naigao area of Dadar in Bombay. B. S. Venkatrao, the ‘Hyderabadi Ambedkar’, was president of the conference. B. K. Gaikwad, the leader of the Nasik Satyagraha, was also prominent. The conference endorsed the idea of conversion.

Intellectuals and Buddhism

Meanwhile there was increasing interest in Buddhism, chiefly among intellectuals. A. R. Kulkarni left his law practice in Nagpur to study Buddhism and Ambedkar had many questions for him. Among the most important intellectuals were Dharmanand Kosambi and his son D. D. Kosambi. Kosambi, from a Brahman family, wrote ‘Bhagwan Buddha’, published in 1940, which greatly influenced Ambedkar’s approach to Buddhism. He not only built a vihara in Bombay for the use of Ambedkar’s people, but became a bhikkhu for a time. His son, D. D. Kosambi, was a widely acknowledged scholar and did much to ensure the translation and use of the Pali scriptures.
Among the most interesting intellectuals was a trio of high caste north Indian Hindus. The close friends who often talked of what they could do to revive Buddhism were especially important in the day-to-day formation of Ambedkar Buddhism. Rahul Sankrityayan was a brilliant and charismatic lecturer, very interested in Tibet. He brought Tibetan manuscripts to India and had a special concern for Buddhists as he travelled widely. Anand Kausalyayan was especially interested in the study of Hindi and not only established a college in Nagpur but translated Ambedkar’s ‘The Buddha and His Dhamma’ into Hindi. Jagdish Kashyap was primarily interested in education. He taught at Banares Hindu University and he worked to try to restore the ancient university at Nalanda to its former glory.

An English convert to Buddhism, the Ven. Sangharakshita, met Ambedkar before the conversion and discussed Buddhist conversion with him. His organization created the TBMSG (Trailokya Baudha Mahasangha Sahayaka Gana), which was the Indian branch of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. TBMSG established an institution near Pune which did economic and social work as well as meditation and teaching and later a very elaborate institution in Nagpur. A new leader, Lokamitra, also English, has continued to expand its influence and programme.

Ambedkar’s all India service

In the 1940s, Ambedkar was able to work in fields that affected all of India, not just the Dalits. He became Minister of Labour in the Viceroy Council. In 1947 the constituent assembly was created to work on the constitution of India. Ambedkar had become law minister in Nehru’s first cabinet. And as such he was chairman of the drafting committee for the constitution. With considerable brilliance he managed the discussion that created the constitution, and he came to be called the architect of the Indian Constitution. He then was assigned to work on the Hindu Code Bill where he got much less support and in 1951 he resigned. It is widely supposed that Gandhi was responsible for Ambedkar’s initial appointment to the Viceroy’s council.

1956 – the conversion

The current most acceptable name for Ambedkar’s Buddhism is Navayana, a ‘new vehicle’. The prevalent name after the conversion was Neo Buddhist, but this was then discarded as indicating an inferior Buddhism. The term Dalit (oppressed) came into use when the Mahars named the Dalit Panthers after the Black Panthers in the United States. Black and Dalit are similar terms in that they are self-chosen and do not indicate any fault of the group itself. Dalit replaces the term used by Gandhi, Harijans, meaning people of God, which was never acceptable to Ambedkar who felt it was patronizing. Dalit encompasses all the marginalized: Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, nomads and other backward castes.

Conversion

The actual conversion took place on 14 October 1956, 20 years after the initial decision to leave Hinduism and convert to Buddhism. The traditional oaths at the conversion ceremony were administered in Pali by the oldest Bhikshu in India, Mahastavir Chandramani. At the age of 83, the Ven. Chandramani was head of an ashram at Kushinagar, in northern India. He was a Burmese Buddhist who had studied in Sri Lanka. Also present at the conversion ceremony was the general secretary of the Maha Bodhi society, Devipriya Valisinha. Both
Ambedkar's life and his Navayana Buddhism

Ambedkar and his wife, Dr Ambedkar, were converted. Also at the ceremony was Waman Godbole, an employee of the Indian railways who had basically organized the 14 October ceremony.

The conversion ceremony was held in Nagpur, home of the Nags, people Ambedkar felt had been Buddhist in pre-Hindu days. Interestingly enough, Buddhist remains were found near Nagpur within 30 years of the conversion. Ambedkar recited his own version of Buddhist oaths and then as a Buddhist offered conversion to a massive audience. There were according to estimates, over a half a million people coming from all over the Maharashtrian area, dressed in white (see also Kadam 1997).

The twenty-two oaths taken at the time of conversion offer another rejection of Hinduism. The first five reject the worship of specific gods and goddesses, referring to the actual worship Untouchables would perform before the conversion.

**Buddhist’s Oaths**

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 has taken birth or incarnation in any form.
5. I do not believe that Lord Buddha was the incarnation of Vishnu. I believe this propaganda is mischievous and false.
6. I will never perform any Shraaddha 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 cause 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 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.¹

Ambedkar died within two months of the conversion and the conversion campaigns were continued by the Ven. Kausalyayan and others who had become Buddhist. The conversions continue and only recently a conversion of a group of nomads and people who would have been Scheduled Tribes but had no permanent address was conducted in Bombay at the race track.
The Buddha and his Dhamma

Ambedkar finished his major project called *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (Ambedkar 1997; Rathore and Verma 2011) before his death. The book is an extremely personal creation of Ambedkar. It is clear that he took every detail of the manuscript under his direction. *The Buddha and his Dhamma* was not published until after Ambedkar’s memorial service, but was as he planned it. Ambedkar arranged most of the format of the book and decreed that on every page there should be an outline of the *mudra* of teaching, *viktara mudra*. Each verse was numbered somewhat in the way of a Christian Bible. Most of the earlier scholars wrote their own versions of *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. The ones by Lakshimi Narasu and Dharmanand Kosambi were of special importance for Ambedkar’s essay.

Ambedkar noted in his introduction there were four problems for him in the teaching of Buddhism that were quite puzzling: one was the answer to the question of Parivaja namely leaving home as a wanderer. The traditional answer is the Buddha took Parivaja because he saw a sick person, an old person and a dead person. The answer is absurd on the face of it, wrote Ambedkar, who then involved the Buddha in peace making among tribes. The second problem was created by the four Aryan truths: if life is sorrow, death is sorrow and rebirth is sorrow, if this is true there is an end to everything! The four truths deny hope to man. Does this mean this gospel of the Buddha is a gospel of pessimism? Do the Aryan truths form part of the original or are they later accretions by the monks? The third problem relates to the doctrines of soul, to karma and rebirth. The Buddha denied the existence of the soul but he is also to have said to confirm the doctrine of karma and rebirth. This contradiction needs to be resolved. The fourth problem relates to the Bhikshu: was this to create a perfect man or to create a social servant? This is a very real question; on it depends the future of Buddhism; so Ambedkar thought (see also Omvedt 2003; Pandyan 1996).

The life of the Buddha was told in a very traditional way; every insight is attached to some phase of the Buddha’s life. There is no expounding of doctrine other than directly by the Buddha. The conclusion of the book includes tributes to the Buddha’s greatness by western scholars.

Elements of Navayana Buddhism

In the current Buddhist community there are Bhikshus from the community itself and from England, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma. The most effective Buddhist Bhikshu in Nagpur is from Japan. He has led pilgrimages to Bodhgaya, built a number of new viharas and won a highly respected place as an interpreter of Buddhism.

Ambedkar’s great wish was to create a sangha of Bhikshus that would be socially aware that would then be of great help to the community. He even secured land in Bangalore for the establishment but the plans never worked out.

There is no direct replacement for the colourful Hindu ceremonies of Ganapati or Durga. There is, however, a new tradition, which unites the community and offers colour and education (see also Beltz 2004; Jondhale and Beltz 2004). The largest by far of the pilgrimages is the one in Nagpur in October. It is estimated that half a million people came to Nagpur for the 14–15 October 1956 conversion ceremony. The fiftieth anniversary of the conversion probably brought twice that number to the city. The conversion was held in a large field near the Vaccine Institute on the outskirts of Nagpur. (The field is now fully inside the growing city.) The Nagpur field of conversion (*diksha bhumi*) is now the site of an enormous *stupa*, modelled after the main classic *stupa* at Sanchi. The *stupa* was inaugurated in 2001 by the late Dr K. R. Narayan, then President of India.
Pilgrimages on every 6 December Ambedkar’s death day, are observed. A pilgrimage to the chaityabumi in Bombay draws ever increasing numbers also from distant places. The stupa there is representative of the whole religion. It does not hold relics but holds an image of the Buddha. Outside there are numerous areas where people buy books and cassettes and music and hear speeches and they often stay with people in Bombay, creating a network of interested Ambedkarites.

There is now an organization of women for rights and responsibilities. The first effort was for women associated with a political figure. This reached new heights of power when Mayawati became the associate of Kanshi Ram and the Bahujan Samaj Party. She most recently served a full five-year term as chief minister in Uttar Pradesh. Buddhist women have also been active and several go to each of the conferences of Sakyamuni (daughters of the Buddha, an international group). Lokamitra has introduced marriage among Bhikshus. His wife, Professor Goody, is head of Ambedkar college in Pune. There is commitment to scholarship and to the study of Buddhist society in India mostly among higher educated young Dalits. There is an all India acceptance of Ambedkar as one of three makers of modern India (with Gandhi and Nehru). All over India there is a recognition of the importance of the Buddhist path. There is, however, a need for recognition of the conversion meaning in the larger Buddhist world (see Figure 24.2). There is a need for the Buddhist conversion in India to be recognized outside of India.

Since 1956 there has been growth in two new fields, Dalit art and Dalit literature (an excellent Dalit autobiography is Moon 2000). Beginning with Marathi in the early 1970s,
Dalit literature has appeared in almost all Indian languages. The literature is not usually about Buddhism, but the writers will tell you that Buddhism freed their minds. Dalit literature deals with Buddhism at times and a poem by the late Daya Pawar attempts to give sorrow a new meaning:

Buddha …
I see you
walking, talking,
breathing softly, healingly,
on the sorrow of the poor, the weak; …

Pawar, 1974. Translated by Eleanor Zelliot, with Vidyut Bhagwat and Jayant Karve

Navayana will grow and change with its rich heritage, its highly educated members and its international connections. We can count on some sort of creativity. The cultural identity of the Untouchables is just now being explored. The art of drumming is an example of its complexity. Pariah is a word derived from drum. Drumming was an important part of some Untouchable relationships with the larger community. Consequently some Untouchables find it tainted by its function for higher castes and refuse any connection. Others find it a glorious talent.

Note
1 From a pamphlet distributed at conversion ceremonies.

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