
**MAHATMA GANDHI AND DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR'S VIEWS ON
CONVERSION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS.**

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ABSTRACT

Conversion is an age-old process of Indian history of religion. In ancient India individual enjoyed religious freedom. They could change their religious faith in accordance to their belief. With the advent of Buddhism the downtrodden section of Indian people were attracted by the teaching of Lord Buddha. When Islam came in India mainly lower caste people of Hindu society were converted to Islam. During colonial rule the Christian missionaries tried to spread the Christianity. From ancient period to Colonial period, a large number of people left Hinduism to uplift their social status and economic condition. Religion is not only a means of spiritual development but also a way of the upliftment of social condition. There are many reasons of conversion. Maltreatment by one's own religion can oblige one to change his religious faith. Sometime individual may be forced to convert to other religion. But conversion can not solve the problems of communal hatred. Gandhi and Ambedkar struggled to abolish 'untouchability'. Ambedkar wanted to reform Hindu society from within. Finally Ambedkar advised the 'dalits' to leave Hindu religion for the upliftment of the 'dalits'. But Gandhi opposed Ambedkar's views on conversion. Gandhi and Ambedkar viewed religion from different perspectives. So they differed from each other on the question of conversion.

Keywords: Brahminism, conversion, caste, dalit, emancipation, satyagraha, secular.

INTRODUCTION

India is a multi-religious and multi-cultural state. From ancient period the Indian people enjoy religious freedom. Conversion is the outcome of that freedom. It is an age-old process in Indian history. With the advent of the Buddhism, the downtrodden section of the Hindu society was influenced by the preaching of Lord Buddha and accepted Buddhism for spiritual salvation. When the Islam came in India, the lower caste Hindus were attracted by the teaching of Islam. A large number of people were converted into Muslim voluntarily and forcefully. During the

British rule the Christian Missionaries' tried to spread Christianity in India. In almost cases, the downtrodden section of Indian society left the Hindu religion and accepted other religion. There were mainly two reasons for conversion ; first, for spiritual salvation and second, for the upliftment of social status. A large number of people in India converted to Muslim and Christian during the Muslim rule and the British rule. In early-twentieth century Arya samaj began 'purification' of Indian Muslims and Christians to bring them 'back' to Hindu religion. Gandhi was against conversion. But Dr. B. R. Ambrdkar, after his long struggle against Brahmanism decided to leave Hindu religion. When Gandhi was informed about Ambedkar`s decision, he criticized his decision. In response of Gandhi`s criticism, Ambedkar justified his position on conversion. Both Gandhi and Ambedkar were against the practice of 'untouchability'. Both of them struggled for the emancipation of the downtrodden section of Indian people. But Gandhi and Ambedkar differed from each other on the question of conversion. Gandhi believed that conversion can not be the solution of the problems of Harijans. But Ambedkar took conversion as the ultimate way for the emancipation of the downtrodden castes of the Hindu society. The main reason of their different views on conversion is that, they viewed religion from different perspectives.

Objective of the paper

The objective of this paper is to know about the difference of ideas between Gandhi and Ambedkar on conversion.

Research methodology of the present work

The present research paper is historical and comparative. Qualitative datas will be analysed to know different perspectives of Gandhi and Ambedkar on conversion.

Gandhi`s views on religion and conversion

Gandhi`s views on conversion has to be understood on the basis of his ideas of religion. Gandhi believed in religious tolerance. His religious mind was influenced by the religious atmosphere of his family and the princely state of Porbandor in Sourashtra where Gandhi was born. Gandhi`s father Karamachand Gandhi was a Vaishnava. Gandhi`s mother Putlibai belonged to the Pranami sect which was combined with the elements of Mohammedanism and Hinduism. There was a Pranami temple in Porbandar. According to Robert Payne Gandhi was deeply influenced by the Pranami faith. Payne wrote :

The Pranami faith deeply influenced the young Gandhi; it taught charity, chastity, peaceful association between the followers of all religions, and a temperate life lived modestly. The use of drugs, tobacco, meat and wine was strictly prohibited. Consciously or unconsciously, Gandhi

grew up with the beliefs of that strange sect born in the early days of the eighteenth century (Robert Payne, 1969: 20).

Gandhi's mother visited the Pranami temple rarely. She was a worshiper of Lord Krishna. It is said that Gandhi inherited his religious nature from his mother. There was an inter-religious dialogic atmosphere in Sourashtra which influenced Gandhi's religious beliefs. Gandhi believed that individual has the right to profess and practice any religion according to their conscience. And the state should not dictate what religion individual will follow. About Gandhi's religious tolerance David Hardiman wrote : "Gandhi believed that all people had a right to practice any religion they chose to identify with, and that forms of worship should not be dictated by the state. Although himself a Hindu, he carried on a sympathetic dialogue with those of other faiths, arguing that each represented a different path towards truth". (David Hardiman, 2003 : 156).

Gandhi's spiritual mentality was developed in his student years in London. Gandhi never read any scripture before going to England. In London, Madam Blavatsky, a theosophist inculcated religious interest in the mind of young Gandhi. In his student years in London Gandhi read the Bhagavat Gita for the first time in English translation of Sir Edwin Arnold. Arnold's another book about the life of Lord Buddha, *The Light of Asia* influenced Gandhi. Gandhi also read Carlyle's book *Hero and Hero Worship*. Robert Payne wrote: "What specially pleased him was Carlyle's depiction of Mohammed as a spiritual hero who fasted, mended his own shoes, patched his own cloak and received the gift of visions with equanimity" (Robert Payne, 1969: 73). In London, Gandhi was impressed by the preaching of Joseph Parker. Gandhi read the New Testament and was deeply influenced by the Sermon on the Mount. Thus multi-religious faith was developed in the mind of young Gandhi. During his student years in London Gandhi regularly visited the Church. In South Africa some of Gandhi's British Friends advised Gandhi to change his religion and convert to Christianity. But Gandhi did not pay heed to their advice. During London years Gandhi had no religious prejudice. He even attended the meeting of the Anjuman Islamia in England (B. R. Nanda, : 26). Gandhi believed in the equality of all religions and the principle of *Sarva Dharma Sama bhava*. The man who influenced Gandhi's religious belief deeply was Shrimad Rajchandra. Gandhi admitted that Rajchandra clarified the truth of religion to him. In his context Robert Payne wrote : "He (Rajchandra) seemed to have read all the religious books of all the faiths, and he was the first to suggest Gandhi that no religion was superior to another, for all religions were concerned to bring the worshipper into the presence of God". (Robert Payne, 1969: 80). Gandhi inherited Vaishnava faith from his family. According to Gandhi the base of Vaishnavism is love towards other. Gandhi wrote : "..... A man who has no love in him is no Vaishnava". (Raghavan Iyer, 1986: 67). Under the influence of Vaishnavism Gandhi argued that the *Antyajas* should be loved. He thought that love towards *Antyajas* is the precondition of swaraj. Gandhi criticized the mentality of uncritical acceptance of *Shastras*.

Gandhi rejected the practice of ‘untouchability’ as justified by *Manusmriti* and *Dharma Shastras*. Gandhi revered Narasinh Mehta as true Vaishnava. But he rejected Mehta’s uncritical acceptance of Shastras. In this respect Gandhi wrote : “At the very beginning of our talk, Maharajshri told me that, in the interpretation of Shastra, reason had no scope. That itself pained me. In my view, that which reason cannot understand and which the heart does not accept can be no Shastra”. (Raghavan iyer, 1956 : 69). In the matter of ‘untouchability’ Gandhi’s logic was that mere approval of Shastras could not be the justification of ‘untouchability’. He argued that the Hindu religion does not recognize ‘untouchability’. It is against reason also. Like other upper caste Hindus Gandhi considered *Harijans* as Hindu. Gandhi did not believe that the upliftment of the ‘untouchables’ would be possible through conversion. Because religion was different thing to Gandhi.

Gandhi thought that the aim of religion is to help its believers to attain spiritual liberation. He argued that the problem of ‘untouchability’ is social problem ; not a religious problem. Even Gandhi argued that no religion is free from limitation. He thought that all religions are more or less true and every religion has imperfection. That is why Gandhi believed that no one need to leave one’s own religion. Gandhi wrote : “My own belief is that every religion is perfect from the point of view of its followers and imperfect from that of the followers of other faithsEveryone may, following his own faith, win his freedom, that is, *moksha*, for to win moksha means to be perfectly free from attachments and aversions”(Judith M. Brown, 2008 : 51). He advised every one to be good Christian, good Muslim and good Hindu. Gandhi criticized the Christian Missionaries’ effort to convert Indians to Christianity. Gandhi wrote : “At the root of missionary effort is also the assumption that one’s own belief is true not only for oneself but for all the world ; whereas the truth is that God reaches us through millions of ways not understood by us”. (Raghavan Iyer, 1986 : 539). Gandhi believed that religion is a matter of faith. God can not be known through argumentive way. According to Gandhi individual can approach to God only through devotion. He criticized not only the effort of the Christian missionaries but the effort of the Arya Samaj and its Shudhi movement. About Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Gandhi wrote : “He has tried to make narrow one one of the most tolerant and liberal of the faiths on the face of the earth.” (David Hardiman, 2003 : 168). Gandhi considered religion purely as spiritual matter.

For this orientation Gandhi criticized Dr. B. R. Ambedkar for his decision of conversion. Both Gandhi and Ambedkar struggled against ‘untouchability’. In 1935 Gandhi said, “The present caste system is the very antithesis of *varnashram*. The soon public opinion abolishes it the better.” (David Hardiman, 2003 : 127). Gandhi appealed to the upper caste Hindus to change their heart and mind towards the *harijans*. Even he urged the caste Hindu girls to marry dalits. He banned any observation of ‘untouchability’ in his ashram. Gandhi led vaikam Satyagraha

against the Nambudiri Brahmins in Kerala. He discouraged conversion of 'dalits' to other religion. Because Gandhi believed that the problem of *harijan* is social problem and it needs social solution. When he heard the news of Ambedkar's decision of conversion Gandhi said, "Religion is not like a home or a clock which can be changed at will. It is an integral part of one's own self, rather than of the body. I am convinced that a change of faith will not serve the cause which they have at heart." (Nardendra Jadhav, 2014 : 2003). Gandhi requested Ambedkar to reconsider his decision. But Ambedkar did not reconsider his decision.

Reasons of Ambedkar's decision for conversion:

The aim of Ambedkar's political struggle was to establish the rights of the depressed classes. He was an activist of the downtrodden castes of Indian society. He struggled for the abolition of 'untouchability' and for the equal rights for the Depressed classes. Ambedkar was not a religious reformer, but a social reformer. But Ambedkar mixed social problem with religion. The goal of Gandhi's life was spiritual liberation. But the goal of Ambedkar's life was to emancipate the 'untouchables' from the exploitation of the 'touchables'. He viewed Brahminism as an obstacle to the development of the downtrodden castes of Hindu society. Ambedkar began his political life as a civil right activist of the 'dalits'. The first civil right movement Ambedkar led was the *Mahad Satyagraha*. On March 19, 1927 Ambedkar launched *Mahad Satyagraha* with his 10,000 followers. The aim of this movement was to establish the right of 'untouchables' over public tank. Right to take water from public tank is a civil right. But the 'untouchables' were denied by the caste Hindus to use public tank in Maharashtra. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar marched to Chavdar lake and broke the age-old tradition. He drank water from this lake. But the reaction of the upper-caste was dangerous. Mahad Satyagrahis were severely attacked by the caste Hindus. Later they purified the lake. The main question Ambedkar put forward before the upper-caste was that if the 'untouchables' were the Hindus, why they would not be allowed to use same well, tank and other public places. Ambedkar wanted to uplift the 'untouchables' within the Hindu religion. Like every Hindu Ambedkar also considered the 'untouchables' as Hindu. Even the dalits also consider themselves as Hindu. He questioned if all were Hindus why the 'untouchables' were not allowed to enter into Hindu temples for worship. Ambedkar demanded that both 'touchables' and 'untouchables' had equal contribution to the flourishment of Hindu religion. He said, "If the Brahmins like Vashista, the *Kshatriyas* like Krishna, the *Vaishyas* like Harsh and the *Shudras* like Tukaram have re-established Hinduism ; the 'untouchables' like Valmiki, Chokhamera and Rohidas have also equally contributed to re-established it. Thousands of 'untouchables' have laid their lives to protect Hinduism ; they are countless from the time of Gita to the *Sindak Mahar* of the battles of Kharda." (Nardendra Jadhav, 2014 : 87). So Ambedkar demanded that the 'untouchables' must have the same civic and religious rights as those of the 'touchables. As a part of the civil right movement, Ambedkar incorporated right to

temple tentry for ‘untouchables’. Gandhi advised the caste Hindus to change their heart towards ‘untouchables’. But Ambedkar did not wait for this. He began his struggles against the Brahminical hegemony. He compared his struggle with the freedom struggle against the British rule. From this spirit Ambedkar supported Parvati temple Satyagraha in Poona on 16 October, 1929. Ambedkar himself led a temple-entry agitation at Kala Ram temple at Nashik on 1 March, 1930. Thousands of ‘untouchables’ gathered in response to Ambedkar’s call. But the followers of Ambedkar were severely beaten by the police and caste Hindus. Even Ambedkar was injured.

Ambedkar tried to reform Hindu society from within. He gave emphasis on temple entry not for spiritual salvation of the ‘dalits’ but for acquiring equal right of the ‘dalits’. Ambedkar wrote : “We will not die if we are not allowed in the temple, nor are we going to be immortalized by gaining entry. We are fighting for equal rights as human beings, and we are also not going to accept anything less.” (Nardendra Jadhav, 2014 : 87). From this statement it can be argued that Ambedkar did not give importance to spiritual aspect of religion. He considered religion as a means of the upliftment of social status. He gave emphasis on the secular aspect of religion.

Ambedkar struggled to reform Hindu society from within. But he was dissatisfied by the antipathy of the upper castes towards the depressed classes. On 13 October, 1935 Ambedkar wrote : “Now we came to the conclusion that there is no change in attitude of the touchables and they are not really to behave with us with affection, despite our continuous struggle. As such we have decided to remain separate from Hindus, to live with self-help and struggle to attain self-elevation. (Nardendra Jadhav, 2014 : 202). The failure of the Mahad Satyagraha depressed Ambedkar. He felt that the mind of the upper-castes would not be changed. In the context of Mahad Satyagraha Ambedkar mournfully said, “Had the caste Hindus admitted the right of the Depressed classes to use the tank, this satyagraha would not have been necessary. Unfortunately, however, the caste Hindus at this place are obstinate in their attitude and refuse to admit the right of the Depressed classes to use the public tank which is open to persons of all castes, including Mohammedans and other non-Hindus”. (Bhalchandra Mungekar, 2017 : 104). Ambedkar felt that the Depressed Classes had no respect of acquiring full manhood within Hindu religion. Because the caste system is an integral part of Hindu religion. Even ‘untouchability’ is justified by Hindu religion. He considered caste system as exclusionary and the ‘untouchables’ ‘who are located at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, suffer most as they are excluded from access to any economic rights except manual labour or service to the castes above them’ (Sukhadeo Throat & Narendra Kumar, 2008 : 9). Ambedkar believed that the caste system is against economic efficiency and its main purpose was exploitation. He thought that if religion deprives its believers from the status of full human being, individual needs to change his/her religion. From 1935 Ambedkar began to criticize Hindu religion. He argued that Hindu religion is against justice, equality and freedom. No other religion than Hinduism dictates the social structure of its

believers. Ambedkar wrote: “The Hindus are the only people in the world whose social order- the relation of man to man – is consecrated by religion and made sacred, eternal and inviolate. The Hindus are the only people in the world whose economic order- the relation of workman to workman- is consecrated by religion and made sacred, eternal and inviolate”. (Bhalchandra Mungekar, 2017 : 75). He also criticized Hindu religion for its rules orientation. The laws of Hindu religion is rigid and static. No one has the right to change its rules. He thought that there is no equality in Hinduism. It differentiates its believers into different castes. He burnt *Manusmriti* in public which legitimizes caste system in Hindu society. The aged-old oppression of the downtrodden castes by the caste Hindus broke the heart of Ambedkar and he declared, “unfortunately, I was born a Hindu untouchables- there was nothing I could do to prevent it. However, it is well within my power to refuse to live under ignoble and humiliating conditions. I solemnly assure you that I will not die a Hindu”. (Nardendra Jadhav, 2014 : 202).

Gandhi saw religion from spiritual perspective. But Ambedkar considered religion from materialist as well as spiritual perspectives. Ambedkar advised ‘untouchables’ to change their religion. He argued that ‘untouchability’ is the consequence of caste-system. And caste system is materialistic dimension of Hindu religion. As long as caste system will sustain, the socio-economic status of the ‘untouchables’ will not be improved. Ambedkar thought that the ‘untouchables’ need wealth, manpower and mental strength to fight against exploitation of the caste Hindus. But the ‘untouchables’ had no such strength. So they need strength and support from outside. As the ‘touchables’ Hindus are not ready to rescue on the ‘untouchables,’ they need the help from the people of other religion. According to Ambedkar’s views if the ‘untouchables’ change their religion, the people of new religion will help them. He thought that there is no place of individualism in Hindu religion. According to Ambedkar the goal of religion should be individual-welfare and progress. He thought that man is not born to serve the society. He argued that ‘untouchables’ had no prospect of self-development within the Hindu religion. Even Hindu religion, according to Ambedkar, is against the spiritual development of the ‘untouchables’. He believed that three factors are required for the development of individual. These are : sympathy, equality and liberty. But the ‘untouchables’ are deprived from all these values. According to his analysis the Christianity and the Islam do not differentiate among their believers. But Hindu religion does it. So he justified conversion for the ‘untouchables’.

CONCLUSION

From the above analysis it can be stated that both Gandhi and Ambedkar struggled to abolish the practice of ‘untouchability’. But Gandhi did not think that conversion could solve the problems of the *harijans*. Because no religion is free from imperfection. He believed that the upliftment of *harijans* is only possible through changing the heart and mind of the upper-caste Hindus. So

Gandhi requested Ambedkar to change his decision of conversion. But Gandhi saw religion only from spiritual perspective. He neglected the material and cultural aspects of religion. Although Gandhi did not consider caste system as derived from Hindu religion, he did not want to abolish caste system. In this respect Gandhi's position is contradictory. On the other hand Dr. B. R. Ambedkar lost his faith in Hindu religion. In spite of being a highly educated and Westernized, Ambedkar had to face humiliation from the caste-Hindus. Humiliation from the caste Hindus and miss-recognition from Gandhi changed Ambedkar's mind. So he took decision to change his religion. He gave importance to material dimension of religion. To him religion was not only a means of spiritual development but a means of material development. He saw caste system as an integral part of the Hindu religion. As there is no possibility of abolishing caste-system, Ambedkar advised the 'untouchables' to change their religion.

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