The Ashoka Vijaya Dashami Controversy

What is the issue?

A political row erupted after a clip of Delhi minister Rajendra Gautam attended a mass conversion gathering where people took the 22 vows.

How did the Buddhist Conversion Day evolve?

- In 1935, Ambedkar, as president of the 'Yeola Conversion Conference' near Nasik, announced his decision to renounce Hinduism to contest the Hindu caste order.
- He advised the members from the depressed castes to leave Hinduism and embrace another religion.
- After 2 decades, he reached a conclusion that Buddhism is an appropriate choice as
    - It had challenged the Brahmanical caste-based social hierarchies in the past
    - It focused on modern ethical values and a scientific temperament
    - It preached peace and compassion for social coexistence
- Under the presence of monk Chandramani, Ambedkar and his wife took the Buddhist vows and embraced Buddhism at Nagpur's Deekshabhoomi.
- He then recited the three jewels (Trisharan), five precepts (Panchsheel), pronounced the self-crafted 22 vows and renounced Hinduism.
- The event is marked as the renaissance of Buddhism in India.
- Ambedkar called his version of Buddhism **Navayana** (followers are called neo-Buddhists), differentiating it with the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions of Buddhism.

What is the present controversy about?

> *The Buddhist population in India is a mere 0.70%, of which 87% are neo-Buddhists. Around 80% of it reside in Maharashtra.*

- Every year, Dussehra is also celebrated as Ashoka Vijaya Dashami to commemorate Buddhist Conversion day.
- Recently, Rajendra Pal Gautam, a Minister in the Aam Aadmi government, participated in a public meeting organized to commemorate Buddhist Conversion Day in his personal capacity.
- Along with the thousands of people assembled, he recited the 22 vows, which is part of the ritual.
- The ruling party accused Mr. Gautam of spreading anti-Hindu sentiments and sought the resignation of Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal.
- Mr. Gautam resigned from his post following the uproar.

Why are the 22 vows controversial?

- The 22 vows refer to a list of pledges Ambedkar had prescribed to his followers after converting from Hinduism to Buddhism on 14 October, 1956 in Nagpur.
- The vows are divided into three major sections.
    - **First part-** It pledges to refuse to worship the Hindu pantheon or to follow Hindu religious dogmas (vows no. 1, 2, 3, 5 and 21).
    - **Second part**- It challenges the authority of the Brahmin priest (vows no. 4, 6, 8 and 19).
    - **Third part**- The rest promises to follow Buddhist principles.

How about Ambedkar as a revolutionary social reformer?

- **Caste**- Ambedkar's writings on social questions offer intellectual and critical inquiry about the problems of an exploitative Hindu caste order.
- He wanted to liberate socially marginalised communities from the stranglehold of caste.
- **Untouchability**- He wanted to end the inhuman practice of untouchability.
- **Religion-** His academic work is well-known for the scrutiny of Hindu philosophical texts.

References

1. https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/explained-the-ashoka-vijaya-dashami-controversy/article65998519.ece?homepage=true
2. https://theprint.in/india/what-are-the-22-vows-of-br-ambedkar-at-the-centre-of-bjp-aap-conversion-controversy/1160856/

Quick facts

The Philosophy of Buddhism

- **Three Jewels-**There are three cornerstones of Buddhism.
    1. Buddha
    2. Dharma- teaching of the Buddha
    3. Sangha- community who follow the teaching
- **Five Precepts**- These are the basic ethical guidelines for the followers of the philosophy.
    1. To abstain from taking life
    2. To abstain from taking what is not given
    3. To abstain from sensuous misconduct
    4. To abstain from false speech
    5. To abstain from intoxicants as tending to cloud the mind
- **The Four Noble Truths-** They are the foundational tenets of Buddhism, which spark awareness of suffering.

1. The truth of suffering
2. The truth of the cause of suffering
3. The truth of the end of suffering
4. The truth of the path that leads to the end of suffering

- **The Eightfold Path-** It is at the heart of the middle way and encourages us to seek the simple approach.
    1. Right Understanding
    2. Right Intent
    3. Right Speech
    4. Right Action
    5. Right Livelihood
    6. Right Effort
    7. Right Mindfulness
    8. Right Concentration

