

**CASTE, RELIGION, AND CONVERSION: CONTESTATION OF CASTE
THROUGH BUDDHISM AMONG NON-MAHAR COMMUNITIES IN
MAHARASHTRA**

**A Thesis submitted in December 2022 to the University of Hyderabad in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of**

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN

CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND INCLUSIVE POLICY



**हैदराबाद विश्वविद्यालय
University of Hyderabad**



INSTITUTION OF EMINENCE

BY

GHADAGE TUSHAR MADHUKAR

(Reg. No: 15SIPH02)

CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION & INCLUSIVE POLICY

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

UNIVERSITY OF HYDERABAD

HYDERABAD- 500046

TELANGANA-STATE

INDIA

DECEMBER-2022



University of Hyderabad



CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled "**Caste, Religion, and Conversion: Contestation of Caste through Buddhism among non-Mahar communities in Maharashtra,**" submitted by **Ghadage Tushar Madhukar** bearing the registration number **15SIPH02** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Centre for the Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy is a bonafide work carried out by him under my supervision and guidance.

This thesis is free from plagiarism and has not been submitted previously in part or in full to this or any other University or Institution for the award of any degree or diploma. Further, the student has the following publication(s) before submission of the thesis/monograph for adjudication and has produced evidence for the same in the form of an acceptance letter or a reprint in the relevant area of his research.

A. The research scholar has published Journal/Articles in the following publications:

1. Ghadage, Tushar. (2020). Ambedkarites in Making: The Process of Awakening and Conversion to Buddhism among non-Mahar communities in Maharashtra. *Caste: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*. Vol. 1, No.2, October 2020. Pp. 107-120. (ISSN No. 2639-4928).

And

B. The research scholar has made presentations in the following Workshop/Conferences:

1. "Ambedkarites in Making: The Process of Awakening and Conversion to Buddhism among non-Mahar communities in Maharashtra," (International Conference) on Unfinished Legacy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *The New School*, New York, USA from 24th October to 26th October 2019.

2. "Caste, Religion, and Conversion: Dalits Contestation Against Caste in an Indian Village," (Graduate Research Workshop) at *Centre for World Austronesia and Indigenous Peoples, Institute of Anthropology*, National Tsing Hua University, Hsinchu, Taiwan on 15th June 2018.

As per the University of Hyderabad rules, the M.Phil. coursework done in the Department of Anthropology in any university is considered Ph.D. coursework. Therefore, he was exempted from doing Ph.D. coursework again in the Ph.D. program. Further, the student has completed the following courses towards the fulfillment of the coursework required for a Ph.D. in the Center for the Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy:

Sr. No	Course No.	Name of the Course	Credits	Pass/Fail
1	AN701	Advanced Anthropological Theories	4	Pass
2	AN702	Advanced Research Methods	4	Pass
3	AN723	Political Anthropology	4	Pass
4	AN780	Dissertation	12	Pass

Date: 30th December 2022.

[Signature]
 Supervisor,
 CSSEIP
 School of Social Sciences
 University of Hyderabad
 29/12/2022

[Signature]
 Head,
 CSSEIP
 HEAD CSSEIP / SSS
 University of Hyderabad
 HYDERABAD-500046
 29/12/2022

[Signature]
 Dean,
 School of Social Science
 अध्यक्ष / DEAN
 समाज विज्ञान संकाय
 School of Social Sciences
 हैदराबाद विश्वविद्यालय
 University of Hyderabad
 30/12/22



University of Hyderabad



प्रतिष्ठित संस्थान
INSTITUTION OF EMINENCE

DECLARATION

I, **Ghadage Tushar Madhukar**, hereby declare that this thesis, entitled "**Caste, Religion, and Conversion: Contestation of Caste through Buddhism among non-Mahar communities in Maharashtra**," submitted by me under the supervision of **Prof. Sreepati Ramudu** (CSSEIP), is a bonafide research work and free from plagiarism. I also declare that it has not been submitted previously in part or in full to this University or any other University or Institution for the award of any degree or diploma. I hereby agree that my thesis can be deposited in Shodhganga/INFLIBNET.

A report on plagiarism statistics from the University Librarian is enclosed.

Date: 30th December 2022.

Place: Hyderabad

Signature of the student
(Ghadage Tushar Madhukar)
Reg. No: 15SIPH02
CSSEIP
School of Social Sciences
University of Hyderabad

Signature of the Supervisor **Supervisor**
(Prof. Sreepati Ramudu) **CSSEIP**
CSSEIP **School of Social Sciences**
School of Social Sciences **University of Hyderabad**
University of Hyderabad

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	vi
Abbreviations	xi
Illustrations	xii
Maps	xiv
Introduction	1
Chapter One	
Caste, Religion, and Conversion: Survey of Literature	35
Chapter Two	
Debating Religion and Conversion: Contextualizing Buddhist Discourse in India	66
Chapter Three	
Ambedkarites in Making: The Process of Awakening among Non-Mahar Communities in Maharashtra	104
Chapter Four	
Activist Missionary: Strengthening the roots of Buddhism amongst non-Mahar communities in the Marathwada region	148
Chapter Five	
Buddhism in Practice: The challenge of confronting caste and reconstructing society	203
Conclusion	258
Works Consulted	273
Appendix	287

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is a humbling experience to acknowledge those people who have, mostly out of kindness, helped me along the journey of my Ph.D. I am indebted to so many for their encouragement and support.

I am forever indebted to Prof Sreepati Ramudu, my supervisor, for his unwavering support, encouragement, and patience throughout this process. He has always been there when I needed his help, reviewing my progress constantly, guiding me through my Ph.D., and ensuring my thesis was always on track. I will cherish the beautiful memories that I had with you.

I am fortunate to have Prof N Sudhakar Rao Sir as my Ph.D. DRC member who was also my MPhil supervisor; it has been an incredible journey with him. My academic and university beginnings may be traced back to him. Since that time, for the past ten years, he has been an invaluable pillar of support in all the endeavors that I have undertaken in my academic life. My work has benefited a lot from his kin observations and feedback, which are paramount to the realization of this thesis. Thank you very much for being a kind and generous mentor. I'll never be able to repay you for your support.

Prof K Y Ratnam, my other DRC member, thank you for inspiring us through your actions and converting textbook learning into practice. Your supportive nature and always-ready-to-help attitude are my takeaways from this engagement with you during my Ph.D. I will be forever thankful to you.

Prof. Soumya Dechamma, of the Centre of Comparative Literature, University of Hyderabad one of the kind-hearted individuals I have met in the academic world. She goes out of her way to help people. She has always been there whenever I need suggestions and support. She and her family, Nandu sir, Muthu, and Poovi, opened the doors of their house to host me during the time of the conference in New York.

The conference 'Unfinished Legacy of Dr. Ambedkar-' organized by India China Institute, The New School, New York, paved the way for my first-ever academic publication. My gratitude to the organizers for allowing me to present my paper in the presence of distinguished scholars in the field of anti-caste studies, scholars like Prof. Sukhdev Thorat, Prof. Christopher Queen, Prof. Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, Prof. Scott R. Stroud, Prof. Anupama Rao, Prof. Shailaja Paik, Dr. Suraj Yengde and others listening to them and getting feedback on my paper shaped my arguments and the writing. It was one of the best experiences I have ever had in my academic life. I sincerely thank the J-CASTE- A Global Journal on Social Exclusion for providing the publishing platform for my first academic writing. Thanks are also due to Dr. Vivek Kumar Narayan, Asoka University, the discussant of my paper at the conference. His critical reading of my writing and feedback guided me in developing my argument.

Thanks to Prof Ku, Kun-hui from the Institute of Anthropology, National Tsing Hua University, Hsinchu, Taiwan. Her early inputs on my research and emphasis on gender aspects made me reflect and explore the area further. The paper I presented in The New School is an outcome of those preliminary discussions I had with Prof. Ku. Thank you very much for agreeing to mentor me during my stay in Taiwan as an exchange student of the Taiwan Experience Education Program (TEEP@India), 2018. Another life-changing experience I had during my stay in one of the oldest civilizations- the Chinese country Taiwan.

My academic and personal life have benefitted immensely from the guidance of my dear friends Dr. Dickens Leonard and Dr. Manju E. P. These are the ones who kept me going whenever I felt doubtful of myself. They also reminded me of the realities of the situation when I was not putting in enough effort. They cared for me like my local guardians and family. I want to express my gratitude for everything.

Prof Ajailiu Niumai, Prof Rani Ratnaprabha, and Prof Raja Mohan Rao were very helpful during my research at the Centre for the Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy. Prof Sumeet Mhaskar, O P Jindal Global University, was kind enough to review my initial Ph.D. proposal draft. His suggestions helped me identify the core research problems of my research.

I am deeply indebted to Ashok Tangade and Manisha Tokle for their help during my fieldwork. Without their support, it wouldn't have been possible to conduct this study smoothly. Thanks are due to my dear friend Baliram Nade. My fieldwork was possible because of him and his family. He gave me a place in his family and made my stay in the field pleasant. I will cherish the fond memories throughout my life. Community leaders like Sandeep Upare, Ajinkya Chandane, G S Dada Kamble, and Amarsing Dhaka are crucial people I met during my fieldwork and have impacted me significantly.

Special thanks to Mehjabeen and Chandu, office staff at CSSEIP; they were always there for us whenever we needed help. My other co-researchers at the center are Vinod, Asha, Milind, Rose, Sheshu, Munna, Jiyad, Maruthi, Kishor, and Srihari. I learned a lot from their research work.

I want to take this opportunity to thank my friends on campus who made my stay here enjoyable and filled with learning. Dontha Prashant- a dear friend and scholarly leader who inspired me in many ways. Dear friends Matta Srinu, Prakash Purshevar- a linguist working on the Telangana dialect; Deepak Barkhade- a fellow traveler in Taiwan, and Dr. Ramesh Dhiravath- a philosophy scholar, thank you all for being there. Thanks, my dear Kabali-readers, for sharing the space with me: Dr. Thongam Bipin, Shinaj, Dr. Vellaisamy, Thoibi, and Dr. Sandip Kong. Those crucial days kept me on track through our reading circle. Thanks to Dr. Barath for his genuine concern for others I could experience during his short stay on campus while he was writing his thesis.

Over the last seven years, my participation in conferences and workshops at NTHU, Taiwan; CSSS, Kolkata; and MIDS, Chennai, shaped my ideas and arguments. These conferences, seminars, suggestions, and discussions helped me improve my understanding and fine-tune my thesis.

I got most of my reference books and literature resources from IGML and CSSEIP library, University of Hyderabad. My sincere thanks to the library staff. The National Tsing Hua University and National Chiao Tung University Libraries in Hsinchu, Taiwan, were where I had the best experiences working in a student-friendly ambiance.

I must acknowledge the UGC for Junior Research Fellowship (JRF) and the Ministry of Education, Taiwan, for the visiting fellowship TEEP@India to Taiwan to support financially in completing this thesis.

I am grateful to Student organizations: Ambedkar Students' Association- for engraving the fighting spirit in generations of students from diverse backgrounds and standing for self-respect. DSU, BSF, TSF, SIO, and MSF for leading the oppressed through alliances in the struggle for social justice. Friends from across the organizations: Vijay, Sunkanna, Iniyavan, Naresh, Sabari, Prajwal, Ramesh, Gopi, Kavya, Manasi, Himabindu, Raju Ch, Somasekhar, Skandgupta, Noor Bhai, Thahir, Ali Bhai, Ayub, Fasi, Ashique, and Shahal for inspiring through your constant engagement with academics as well as students activism on campus and outside. Thank you all.

My Marathi fraternity at University, Dr. Kailash, Dr. Piraji, Ravi, Anant, Suresh, and friends at NRS hostel- Bihari Lal, Arijit, and Debnath, thank you for being there. It was a wonderful time we had at University. Dear friends in Chinese country, Taiwan, Chin-chi, Bisazu, their kids John and Annie, and their parents, thank you for making me part of your family during my stay in Taiwan. I had a great time with you.

My dear friends Datta Nimbalkar- a soldier who keeps me inspired through his resilient struggle to do better every day; Sagar and Suvidha for always keeping a check on my progress, and Dr. Bipin Yewale, you deserve special mention for doing what you do best, you taught me how to handle things without judging anyone.

Special gratitude goes to my friends who have been a significant source of support for over a decade now: My "bestest-fastest friends' squad," Divya, Dr. Dipti, and Dr. Mahendran; I am so proud of you guys. Thanks for keeping up with my mountain climbing. I am incredibly grateful to my dear friend Dhilip, pioneering the trend and who discovered this University for us.

I want to sincerely thank my family for always showing how proud they are of me. Special thanks to my elder brothers, Vinod Bhau and Umesh Bhai, and my Mother- you should know that your support and encouragement were worth more than I can express on paper. Thanks to my Sister, Brother-in-law, and nephew Athang. Because of you, I could stay at University without any worries and work on my project.

My in-laws, Achan, Amma, and Dr. Sruthi, thanks for showing faith in me; it meant a lot—special mention of Puma- the other beings, the bundle of joy, and the mood lifter.

I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to Swathi, my partner, the gem of my life unveiled during my journey toward a Ph.D., the best thing that ever happened to me. Thank you for being my editor, proofreader, and sounding board. But most of all, thank you for being my best friend and for your love and constant support. I owe you everything.

To my father, Bhau, and uncles, Dada and Nana, who were there with me at the beginning of this journey, I miss them when I am finally submitting my thesis.

This thesis is dedicated to them.

ABBREVIATIONS

ASA	Ambedkar Students' Association
BAMCEF	The All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation
BSP	Bahujan Samaj Party
DNT	De-notified and Nomadic Tribes
DPI	Democratic Party of India
MHA	Manavi Hakka Abhiyan
OBC	Other Backward Classes
RPI	Republican Party of India
SC	Scheduled Castes
ST	Scheduled Tribes
SSM	Satyashodhak Samaj Mahasangha
SSF	Satyashodhak Students Federation
VBA	Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi

ILLUSTRATIONS

Tables

Table 4.1 Details of the respondents	150
Table 4.2: Distribution of Respondents in Peri-urban and Rural Categories.	153

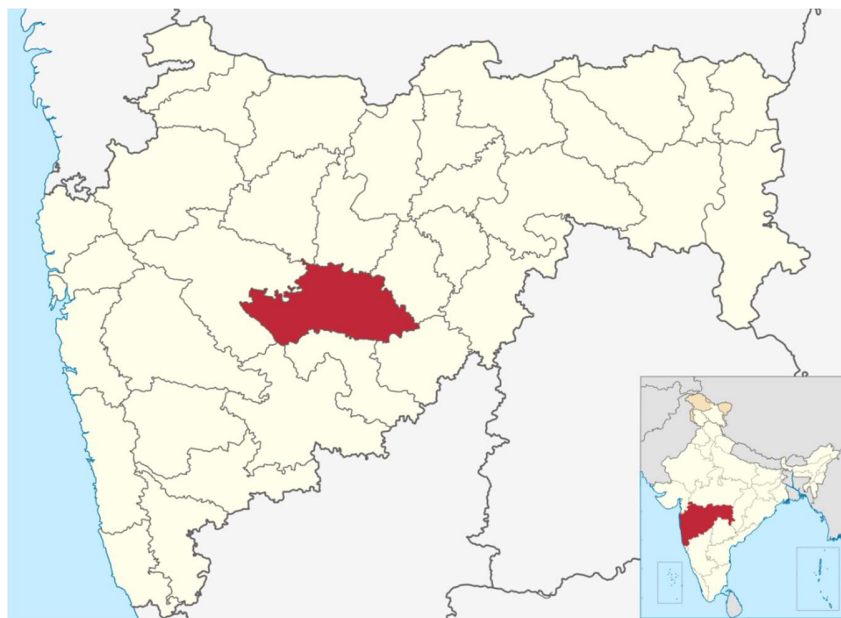
Figures

Figure 4.1: Leaflet advertising the <i>Ambedkarvadi Matang Sabha</i>.	182
Figure 4.2: Leaflet advertising <i>Baudh, Matang, Charmakar Parishad</i>.	184
Figure 4.3: Participants at the conversion ceremony organized by Satyashodhak Samaj Mahasangha at Beed	186
Figure 4.4: The certificate issued to new converts after conversion.	187
Figure 4.5: Hanumant Upare's schedule of public meetings and gatherings planned in March and April 2015.	190
Figure 4.6: Sandeep Upare speaks on the '<i>Chalo Buddha ki Aur</i>' campaign on Ambedkar Jayanti at Ambejogai, Beed.	192
Figure 4.7: Conversion Ceremony of Upare Family and thousands of OBC community members at Deeksha Bhumi, Nagpur.	194
Figure 4.8: Leaflet advertising workshop presided over by Laxman Mane, organized by <i>Coordination Committee of Nomadic tribes, OBC, SC, and ST</i>, Beed.	196
Figure 4.9: Buddhist Conversion Ceremony under the leadership of Laxman Mane at Mahalaxmi Racecourse Ground, Mumbai	200
Figure 5.1: <i>Saryashodhak</i> Wedding Ceremony stage.	209
Figure 5.2: <i>Halgi</i> troupe playing the instrument in the wedding ceremony.	210

Figure 5.3: Ajinkya Chandane (Fourth from right), DPI party members, and bride and groom at the Satyashodhak wedding ceremony.	214
Figure 5.4: Photos of Revolutionary Leaders presented on the wall of Mr. Chandravadan Jadhav in his living room in Beed	234
Figure 5.5: Invitation Card of Buddhist Wedding of the couple belonging to the non-<i>Mahar</i> community.	235
Figure 5.6: The Buddhist wedding dais of the couple belonging to a non-<i>Mahar</i> community inspired by Hanumant Upare's movement for Buddhist conversion.	236
Figure 5.7: Community Gathering on Full Moon Day at Hanumant Upare's residence in Beed	238
Figure 5.8: Manisha Tai Addressing Public gathering on Ambedkar Jayanti at Pali Village in Beed District	246
Figure 5.9: Manisha Tai counseling women devotees who came to perform rituals on Sankranti at Ambedkar Smarak in Beed	247
Figure 5.10: Advertisement Banner of <i>Stree Sanman Parv</i> organized by <i>Maitri Manch</i>, Beed.	249
Figure 5.11: Vaman Dahan Yatra, Beed.	254

MAPS

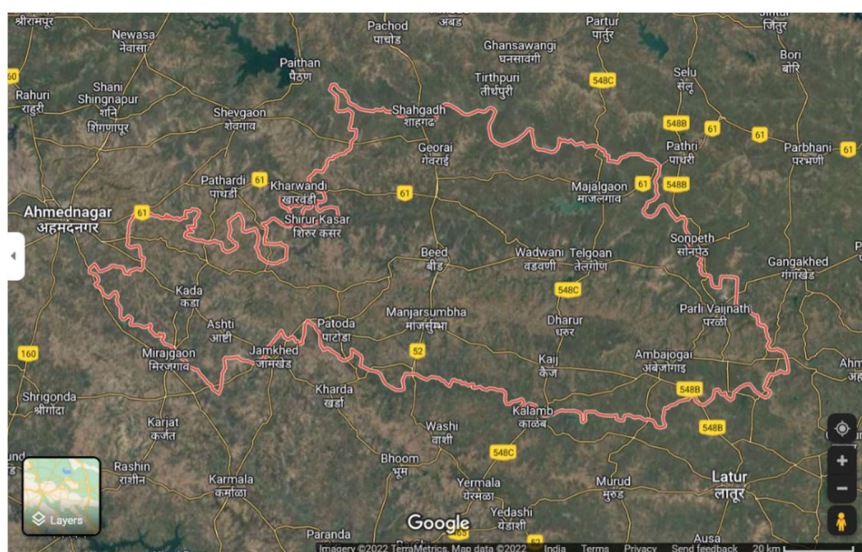
Map 1. Location of Beed district on Map of Maharashtra, India.



Note: The Beed District is highlighted in red color on the Maharashtra map.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:India_Maharashtra_location_map.svg
(Not to the scale)

Map 2: Physical Map of Beed District



(Source: Google Earth)

Chapter: Introduction

Buddhism in India gained some importance in public memory after Dr. Ambedkar's conversion movement in 1956. Dr. Ambedkar called for conversion from Hinduism for a better life, self-respect, and human dignity, which was denied to millions of people based on their Caste. As Ambedkar himself was a *Mahar*, most Buddhist converts belonged to the Mahar caste. Therefore, the conversion movement got restricted to the *Mahar* caste owing to graded inequality, which divides society vertically and places castes one above another in the order of contempt for lower castes in the hierarchy. My grandparents were among the masses who converted to Buddhism post-Ambedkar's conversion event in different parts of Maharashtra. My family and I have always identified as Buddhist converts from the *Mahar* community in a specific context that we are someone not belonging to Hinduism.

I felt attached to my locality and community as I grew up in *Bauddha-Vasti*, the locality of Buddhists in the village. The nomenclature of *Bauddha-Vasti* is also counter to the previously used terminology of *Mahar-Wada*, a dwelling place of the *Mahar* caste in the village. Even now, the upper-caste villagers in their private circles continue to refer to *Bauddha-Vasti* as *Mahar-Wada*. The neo-Buddhist locality and culture imbibed in its Neo-Buddhists community in a small village in the Satara district of Maharashtra always inspired me to follow the path and teachings of Mahatma Phule, Shahu Maharaj, Babasaheb Ambedkar, and Buddha. I have been fascinated by the way my community stood for their self-respect. *Mahar* was the first amongst Scheduled Castes (SC) to leave the village and put an end to the imposed caste-based occupations on them in the village. Contrary, other SC castes from my village remained far from the conversion movement. They preferred to identify as Hindus and continued to stay in the village and perform their caste duties. Growing up in a village and a community, I have lived and experienced the community

closely. Therefore, this positionality put me in an advantageous position to see the community dynamics differently and closely compared to an outsider/non-Buddhist.

The difference between the communities that continued to remain low castes and those who converted to Buddhism was very much evident. I could see and experience many changes in the neo-Buddhist community. The way the neo-Buddhist community has transformed in socio-political, economic, and educational spheres of life is also commendable. There was also a difference in how the upper castes treated marginalized communities of the village. Several scholars have studied and recorded the post-conversion Neo-Buddhist life world. Besides positive changes, scholars have observed contradictions from conversion within the community. One of the contradictions I encountered was multiple religious identities among the *Mahar* caste.

Mahar caste has converted to religions such as Buddhism and Christianity, and some continue to live as Hindus. Few change their religious affiliation according to the context. This gave me the first push towards taking up the issue of the multiple realities and spiritual experiences of conversion of a caste group for my academic exploration. Therefore, for my MPhil, I focused on the multiple religious identities of *Mahar* and the implications of caste atrocities. My MPhil fieldwork further exposed me to the conversion of non-*Mahar* castes to Buddhism in Maharashtra. Being from Maharashtra and Buddhist by identity, I was surprised to learn about this development as it never made headlines in news circulations. It was never discussed in popular Buddhist discourse in Maharashtra. Buddhist conversion among non-*Mahar* castes became a unique case to explore further this socio-religious movement of Buddhist conversion among non-*Mahar* castes in Maharashtra. Therefore, my life experience as someone belonging to the community of the Neo-Buddhists has been an important stake in pursuing this research.

Further, my engagement with student activism and campus politics during my stay on campus made me more conscious about campus life, the people around me, and questions of discrimination against students coming from marginalized communities in Institutions of higher education in India. In 2015, I was in the first semester of my Ph.D. when five research scholars at the University of Hyderabad were socially boycotted and publicly ostracized by the University Administration for criticizing the anti-student policies of the Union Government and their prejudice towards marginalized students. These scholars were associated with Ambedkar Students' Association (ASA) and hailed from marginalized identities. They were socially boycotted with strict restrictions on participation in public, administrative spaces, and student activities. They were humiliated to the extent that Rohith Vemula, one among five suspended scholars, ended his life. It was termed an institutional murder for the discriminatory treatment they received at the hands of the administration leading to Rohith's death.

Though many students from marginalized communities had ended their life journey midway by committing suicide before Rohith, it never got elevated to the level that it might create unrest among the campus communities. Rohith's last letter moved many individuals and caused a national stir in higher education institutions and the Dalit movement across the country and abroad. Prashanth quoted Radhika Amma saying, "Rohith was fascinated with Buddhist philosophy and used to talk about it at home. His final rites were also performed as per Buddhist rituals. His mother, therefore, expressed her wish to convert to Buddhism on Babasaheb's birth anniversary."¹ In protest of the undeterred inhuman treatment and discrimination meted out to Dalits daily,

¹ Quoted in Rao, Yogita. (2016). Rohith's mom and brother to embrace Buddhism. *The Times of India*. Accessed on 20th April 2016. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/rohiths-mom-and-brother-to-embrace-buddhism/articleshow/51818828.cms>

Rohith's mother, Radhika Vemula, and brother Raja Vemula both converted to Buddhism at an event organized in Mumbai on the 125th birth anniversary of Dr. Ambedkar in 2016.

This incident again brought my attention to the Buddhist conversion as a form of protest against caste discrimination and undeterred violence unleashed on marginalized communities in India. Rohith's brother Raja Vemula said, "My brother was extremely keen that our family should follow the path of Buddha. In November 2015, when he came home to Guntur to attend his best friend's marriage, he told us a lot about why Ambedkar had chosen to convert to Buddhism in 1956. However, at that time, we could not see the value of what my brother was trying to say. However, his death has opened our eyes to the reality."²

Though Rohith did not get enough time to pursue his desire to follow Buddhism, his mother and brother performed his last rites according to the Buddhist rituals and respected his wish. Moved by Rohith's words and the movement after that, and my personal experiences as a member of the neo-Buddhist community, I took to explore the conversion to Buddhism among non-Mahar communities for my Ph.D.

Context of the study:

In his speech delivered at the Yeola conference, Dr. Ambedkar asked Dalits, in general, and Mahars, in specific, why do you remain in a religion that does not treat them as human beings (Zelliot, 2005).³ He suggested religious conversion to eliminate the ill-treatment they receive in

² Quoted in Thakkar, Mehul R (2016). Rohith Vemula's brother and mother converted to Buddhism. *Deccan Chronicle*. Accessed on 20th April 2016. <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-affairs/150416/rohith-vemula-s-brother-and-mother-convert-to-buddhism.html>

³ Zelliot, Eleanor. (2005:6). Ambedkar's Conversion. New Delhi: Critical Quest.

the caste society. For this call of Dr. Ambedkar for conversion, *Mahars* of Maharashtra responded and converted. However, most of the other non-Mahar Castes generally preferred not to convert.

According to the All-India Census 2011,⁴ the Scheduled Caste (SC) population comprises 16.2% of India's total population. Maharashtra state hosts 6.5% of countries total SC population, which is 10.2% of Maharashtra's total population. There are almost 59 Scheduled Castes in Maharashtra, and out of the 59 Scheduled Castes from Maharashtra, *Mahar*, *Matang (Mang)*, *Chambhar*, and *Bhangi*, these four castes constitute almost 92% of the total SC population of the State. Amongst these four major SC castes in Maharashtra, *Mahar* consists of 60.30% of the total SC population of the State. *Matang* follows it as the numerically second-largest Scheduled Caste, followed by *Chambhar* and *Bhangi* castes.

Dr. Ambedkar's contemporary non-*Mahar* Dalit leaders, such as Babu Jagjivan Ram, J. M. Mandal, Rasiklal Biswas, Dharma Prakash, P. N. Rajbhoj, M. C. Rajah, and Palwankar Baloo opted to work for emancipation and upliftment of marginalized communities by remaining in Hindu fold (Jaffrelot, 2005, p. 125).⁵ The majority preferred not to side with Ambedkar in his decision to convert to other religions. According to the All-India Census 2011, Hinduism is the predominant religion of the non-*Mahar* SC population of the State. There were few examples of people from non-*Mahar* castes converting to other religions, specifically Christianity. However, for a longer time, there were few instances of non-*Mahar* castes converting to Buddhism. Amongst those few instances of conversion to Buddhism remained secluded incidents and individual cases.

⁴ Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. (2011). Census of India.

<https://censusindia.gov.in/census.website/data/population-finder> Accessed on 22 October 2022.

⁵ Jaffrelot, Christophe. (2005). *Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste*. London: Hurst and Company.

However, on the 50th Anniversary of Dr. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism, two influential leaders of the anti-caste movement from Maharashtra, Laxman Mane⁶ and Adv Eknath Awad,⁷ converted to Buddhism. Both converted to Buddhism at *Deeksha Bhumi*, Nagpur, in October 2006. After taking *Deeksha* of Buddhism, they called for mass conversion. In response to their call for conversion to their followers, thousands took to Buddhism in the same year. It saw the second-largest Buddhist conversion in Maharashtra after Dr. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in 1956. Thousands of people from 42 different nomadic tribes and other non-*Mahar* scheduled Castes, predominantly *Matang* and *Chambhars*, have converted to Buddhism in an event organized at the Mahalaxmi Racecourse in Mumbai.⁸ It was also the venue decided by Dr. Ambedkar for the conversion in the western part of Maharashtra post-14th October 1956 conversion event at Nagpur, which could not happen due to his death on December 6th same year, within two months after his conversion.

One of the critical anti-caste leaders, the late Hanumant Upare hailing from Other Backward Communities (OBC) in Maharashtra, who was working tirelessly amongst the OBC community, announced his wish to convert to Buddhism. He declared he would convert to

⁶ Laxman Mane is a nomadic tribal leader and writer whose autobiography *Upara (Outsider)* is a landmark in Marathi literature. He converted to Buddhism on October 2, 2006, in Nagpur. He has also awarded with Padma Award for his work for Nomadic Tribes in Maharashtra.

⁷ Adv. Eknath Awad, fondly called "Jija" by his followers, was one of the tallest Dalit activists in Maharashtra and hailed from the Matang caste. He worked for economic empowerment of the most depressed communities through the organization he had founded called "Manavi Hakka Abhiyaan," or Human Rights Movement for Dalits from Maharashtra and predominantly from the Marathwada region.

⁸ Jore, Dharmendra. (2007). Nation's largest conversion at racecourse. *Hindustan Times*, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/nation-s-largest-conversion-at-racecourse/story-8ZTI7mXsthOPByXrzBF6sL.html> Accessed on 22 October 2022.

Buddhism along with lakhs of his fellow community members.⁹ His wish remained unfulfilled as he passed away a year before his proposed conversion date. Hanumant Upare's family members and his supporters carried forward the movement and fulfilled his wish to convert to Buddhism in 2016 at Deeksha Bhumi, Nagpur. Two events were organized in subsequent years, and thousands of OBC community fellows took Deeksha of Buddhism and renounced Hinduism.

The most conspicuous thing about the Buddhist conversion movement among non-*Mahar* communities was the well-organized efforts of the anti-caste movement. The social activists are essentially taking an active role in reaching out to the masses and convincing them to make the conscious decision to convert to Buddhism. Most importantly, it is happening in a post-Ambedkar period where social activists have been working as missionaries to take Buddhism to the masses. These well-organized efforts of the activist yet to get attention in academia. Since this movement is yet to be studied, these efforts are out of the purview when we discuss collective religious conversion movements in history.

There is a need to highlight these revolutionary events happening in the remote corners of Maharashtra. It is also important to note that this movement is turning from urban to rural. Therefore, it was forgotten as if it did not have any connection with the ongoing, more significant anti-caste movement. There are scarcely any studies on these missionaries in Maharashtra that highlight and capture the life world of the converts. They contest Caste through religion in their daily lives. It needs to be recorded and studied how these activists organize themselves into religious activities as social activists, not being trained missionaries.

⁹ Deshpande, Alok. (2014). 6000 OBCs to embrace Buddhism. *The Hindu*.
<https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/Buddhism-our-real-home-Maharashtra-OBCs/article60091723.ece>
Accessed on 22 October 2022.

Research Problem:

Dalits are in all spheres of life: social, cultural, religious, political, and economic, face physical assault and other outbreaks of violence, especially when they try to gain lawful access to fundamental human rights and equal participation in community life's socio-political, religion-cultural, and economic spheres. It is evident from the studies that Dalits are discriminated against, and atrocities have been inflicted on them—irrespective of their religious status. Even though Dalits remained within the Hindu fold, atrocities were inflicted indiscriminately. Ambedkar (1979:68)¹⁰ argued that the practice of untouchability continued and discrimination based on Caste persists as the reasons for the same could be found in the sanctity of religious scripture approving Caste. They continued to practice discrimination, and there was nothing wrong with it as they were following their religious beliefs and faith, which justified the practice of caste discrimination and untouchability.

The adoption of Buddhism was seen as a clear step toward equality in the repressive social structure based on Caste. One experiences freedom from oppression and previous social and religious ideologies through conversion. On the other hand, Buddhism has exhibited certain hegemonic tendencies in Sri Lanka despite its commitment to equality, the advantages of liberty, and the promotion of brotherhood. Scholars have noted that the revival of a new form of Sinhala Buddhism became the ideology of the Sinhala ruling class. They enjoy higher status in Buddhist rituals (Silva, 2017, p. 10-11).¹¹ In Maharashtra, Mahar is the largest scheduled Caste that converted to Buddhism earlier. They dominated Buddhist discourse until recently, when Matang,

¹⁰ Ambedkar, B R. (1979:68). *Annihilation of Caste*, In Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 1.

¹¹ Silva, Kalinga Tudor. (2017). Buddhism, Social Justice, and Caste: Reflection on Buddhist Engagement with Caste in India and Sri Lanka, *Society and Culture in South Asia*, 3(2), p. 1-13.

certain nomadic tribes, and Other Backward Castes (OBC) also converted to Buddhism. There has always been a hierarchy of dominance, subjugation, and animosity between various castes. Buddhism in Maharashtra was long associated with specific castes; titles like "Mahar-Buddhists" were used to describe recent Buddhist converts, while "Matang-Buddhists" denoted Buddhist converts from the Matang community. This reveals the sense of "us" versus "them" that Buddhist converts from various ranks have (Paik, 2011, p. 234).¹²

Scholarly works on religious conversion have shown through empirical studies that conversion has boosted social mobility among Dalits and played a significant role in the liberation of downtrodden communities in India (Kuranae, 1999; Beltz, 2005). However, few studies (Alexander, 1998; Lobo, 2001; Deshpande & Bapna, 2008) also claim that even though conversion has brought social mobility among the marginalized section of society, they have been placed in their caste groups even in new religions after conversion. Caste-based inequalities continue to reproduce in the new religions in deceptive forms. Caste as a social reality has kept generating newer forms of Dalit exclusion.

According to Ghadage (2020), in such situations, "there is always a fear of different castes in Maharashtra not assimilating into Buddhism, as simply casting off their religion does not give them the feeling of equality, especially when the graded inequality of the caste system is deeply ingrained in society."¹³ There is more to religion than just its highest ideals; it is also about its

¹² Paik, Shailaja. (2011). Mahar-Dalit-Buddhist: The history and politics of naming in Maharashtra, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 45, 2 (2011): 217–241.

¹³ Ghadage, Tushar. (2020). Ambedkarites in Making: The Process of awakening and Conversion to Buddhism among Non-Mahar communities in Maharashtra. *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*. Vol. 1, No. 2, October 2020. Pp. 107-120.

actual living practice. Webster (2002) argues that "The highest values of equality, fraternity, and liberty should not only remain teachings and belief systems of religion but also be practiced in the customs, usages, observances, rituals, and everyday life of religious communities."¹⁴ Otherwise, it can further become an obstacle to forming a community of the new Buddhists, where the conversion was intended to do away with Caste feeling entrenched via graded inequality.

Existing scholarships on Buddhism and the conversion movement in Maharashtra revolve around Ambedkar's conversion and subsequent conversion among the *Mahar* caste. Most studies seem stuck in the technicalities of whether new converts among the *Mahar* caste have changed since conversion. It either leads to positive or negative thinking about the changes after conversion. Scholars do not report the process of change that is taking place among Buddhists. Conversion is an ongoing process, and it implies movement. Individuals who convert have the place of arrival and the place of departure. Therefore, there is a difference between the conversion processes of people coming from different social backgrounds (Brekke, 2003, p. 181).¹⁵ As Gokhale (1986:279) argued, the conversion among Dalits angers the Upper Caste because they dared to flout the eternal religion to increase the number of atrocities against Dalits. On several occasions, atrocities have been committed by non-SC lower castes. Therefore, it creates space for hostility among different lower castes as well.

This research mainly looks at this socio-religious movement among new converts of non-*Mahar* castes to Buddhism in Maharashtra and their converted life world. There is a pressing need to study the "experience of conversion" from different social and cultural backgrounds. Studies

¹⁴ Webster, John C B. (2002). *Religion and Dalit Liberation*. New Delhi: Manohar Publication.

¹⁵ Brekke, Torkel. (2003). Conversion in Buddhism? In S. Clarke, & R. Robinson. (eds), *Religious Conversion in India: Modes, Motivations and Meanings*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

are insufficient to comprehend the procedures involved in converting non-*Mahar* castes to Buddhism and the subsequent formation of a religious community within the Buddhist fold, as this work enquires about the conversion among non-*Mahar* castes. Specifically, it examines how members of an anti-caste movement who claim to have adopted it as a result of their conversion to Buddhism interact with various caste identities and cultures. Their socio-religious background and the process they have gone through might have a different story. Therefore, it is crucial to see whether the new converts to Buddhism from non-*Mahar* castes share similar experiences or have different stories. Keeping in mind this empirical reality of Caste in India, the thesis problematized the caste question and tried to explore how it has been addressed in Buddhism.

Objectives of the Research:

This thesis is situated at the intersections of several academic fields: Religious studies, Buddhist Studies, and Anthropology. In light of the literature review and the above statement of the problem, the thesis intends to contribute to the existing body of knowledge and the discipline and our understanding of anti-caste ideology within the context of Buddhism in contemporary Maharashtra by fulfilling the following objectives.

1. To study the conversion process to Buddhism among non-*Mahar* castes in Maharashtra.
2. To understand the role of Buddhist religious conversion in shaping the life of new converts among non-*Mahar* castes in Maharashtra.
3. Investigate the challenges newly converted Buddhists from different caste backgrounds face in expressing and maintaining their religious identity as Buddhists in Maharashtra.

Research Questions:

Today people from different caste backgrounds across the states are converting to Buddhism. Similarly, non-*Mahar* castes who stayed away from conversion discourse joined the conversion movement in Maharashtra. Therefore, this study is concerned with the non-*Mahar* communities and the changing consciousness about their faith in the religion and subsequent conversion to Buddhism. This thesis looked explicitly into the driving force that had a more significant impact on non-*Mahar* communities that began to change their consciousness concerning conversion to other religions as a tactic for overcoming caste injustices. What are the ideological motivations of non-*Mahar* communities behind religious conversion? What is the broader social, religious, and political context in which the conversion movement originated among non-*Mahar* communities in Maharashtra? Are there any community leaders who took the lead in organizing them? Who are these leaders, and who are the participants in the conversion movement? What is their credential as the religious front?

It is a well-established fact that the reasons for the widespread practice of untouchability, discrimination, and atrocities against low Caste by the upper Caste are to be found in the continuing belief and faith of the upper Caste in the institution of Caste. In this context, what strategies are used in the conversion movement to reach out and convince people to convert from Hinduism to Buddhism? It is also essential to understand the imagination and articulation of the non-*Mahar* communities about the notion of equality in the purview of Buddhism. How do they use Buddhism to claim equality?

Merely converting to Buddhism will not ensure a sense of equality and fraternity amongst the converts, especially when there is graded inequality among the Caste that leaves only the lowest

in the caste hierarchy as completely unprivileged (Ambedkar, 1979, p. 167).¹⁶ The caste hierarchy reflects a peculiar logic of graded inequality that prevents the most oppressed from forming a social coalition against the oppressive nature of the upper-caste elite group and their hegemony. It is essential to understand how Dalits deal with the issue of graded inequality among themselves as Buddhists consisting of converts from various castes. Therefore, I raise the question of the current status of these communities in the fold of Buddhism. Moreover, how are they organizing themselves as a religious community?

This study also seeks an answer to the questions raised about conversion to Buddhism, whether it can contest Caste, and whether it will address the issues of caste-based inequalities in the new religion. Whether the newly converted Buddhists have succeeded in rupturing the rigid structural inequalities based on Caste through religious conversion to Buddhism, or have they succumbed to its rigid nature and carried Caste with them to a new religion? In this study, I also look at how the newly converted Buddhists use text, symbols, and rituals to construct what, per them, is Buddhist culture and tradition.

Methods and Methodology

As Buckser and Glazier (2003: xi) argue,¹⁷ "changing one's religion also changes one's world; it shifts the basic presuppositions upon which both self and others are understood." Therefore, it also raises questions about how one faces the changes occurring in the cultural surrounding of an individual. In addition, they claimed that conversion sheds insight on the interaction—and, in many instances, the tension—between an individual's consciousness and the structural constraints

¹⁶ Ambedkar, B. R. (1979). *Thoughts on Linguistic States*, In Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 1.

¹⁷ Buckser, Andrew and Glazier, Stephen D.(eds) (2003). *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*. Rowman & Littlefield.

of community life. Such complexities of religious conversion embedded in the social process require various approaches to investigate it. Anthropology of religious conversion can offer that methodological intervention to address those effectively.

Van der Veer (1996),¹⁸ and Viswanathan (1998),¹⁹ are some scholars who explore conversion as the expansion of Western colonial power through anthropological exploration methods. Even though these studies have included conversion in anthropological discussions, they have not gone to great lengths on the ethnographic information that enables an examination of conversion in many cultures (Buckser and Glazier, 2003: xiii).²⁰ Such ethnographic details of religious conversion have been provided by Roberts (2016)²¹ in his study on Pentecostal Christians. Similarly, Beltz (2005)²² has also taken an ethnographic way to explore and interpret oral and written texts about contemporary Buddhist discourse in Maharashtra. Therefore, the intimate dynamics of conversion can be studied using anthropological approaches, for which the ethnographic perspective is well-suited. Therefore, this study uses anthropological approaches to explore the above research objectives.

The process of conversion and the struggle of contesting Caste through religious conversion to Buddhism is explored in the present study. It tried to understand the small and modest revolutions happening around us. The study focuses on everyday struggles and the world

¹⁸ Van der Veer, P. (1996). 'Introduction.' in *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity*, edited by P. van der Veer, 1–21. New York: Routledge.

¹⁹ Viswanathan, Gauri. (1998). *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

²⁰ Buckser, A and Glazier, SD. (2003). *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion* / Edited by Andrew Buckser and Stephen D. Glazier. Rowman & Littlefield.

²¹ Roberts, Nathaniel. (2016). *To Be Cared for: The Power of Conversion and Foreignness of Belonging in an Indian Slum*. Oakland CA: University of California Press.

²² Beltz J. (2005:206). *Mahar, Buddhist, and Dalit: Religious Conversion and Socio-Political Emancipation*. New Delhi: Manohar.

around the social movements in which people consciously participate. Hardtmann (2009:27)²³ argued that the depth of ethnographic fieldwork "lies no longer in staying long enough at one, two or three localities, or traveling between them, but of extensive following in *any* direction of importance."²⁴

While religious conversion is an ongoing and continuous process and happens across places simultaneously, one must move around to reach out to people. Complex phenomena like religious conversion require a unique approach. As religious conversion is an ongoing and continuous process happening across places simultaneously, one must move around to reach out to people. To address the complexities of conversion, which keeps happening and flowing from place to place, I chose multisite ethnography as it helped me keep moving around to understand the conversion processes of different communities happening at different places in the contemporary Buddhist discourse of the region.

Sites of Inquiry:

The study is primarily an ethnographic work undertaken in the Marathwada region of the State of Maharashtra. In Maharashtra, cities and metropolitan areas have long been seen as the centers of the conversion movement.²⁵ They have been used as research sites in studies on the Buddhist conversion movement in Maharashtra. Most people have not given much thought to the activities in isolated rural and peri-urban communities. Adv Eknath Awad, Hanumant Upare, and Aatmaram Chandane are three crucial leaders of the Buddhist conversion movement among non-*Mahar*

²³ Hardtmann, E.M. (2009). *The Dalit Movement in India: Local Practices, Global Connections*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

²⁴ Cited in Waghmore, Suryakant. (2013: XXV). *Civility Against Caste: Dalit Politics and Citizenship in Western India*. New Delhi: Sage.

²⁵ See Timothy (1997), Omvedt (2003), Jondhale and Beltz (2004), Beltz (2005), Verma (2010), Stroud (2017).

communities in the Marathwada region who hails from the Beed district.²⁶ Though these leaders traveled across Maharashtra and reached out to many places and larger masses, their belonging to the Beed district significantly impacts communities here. As a result, this research focuses primarily on the Beed district located in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra, which is the State's most deprived region and where the Buddhist conversion movement initially gained traction among the non-*Mahar* populations. This research investigates both rural and peri-urban areas in great detail.

I undertook a total of seven months of fieldwork in two phases, the first phase of five months from January 2018 to May 2018; and the second phase of two months of brief fieldwork from March 2019 to April 2019. I continued to stay at the training center run by *Manav Vikas Pratishthan*, an organization located at Padalsingi village in Georai Taluk of the district. The organization is run by a friend Baliram Nade, a professional Social Worker and an activist in the anti-caste movement in the Beed district. He was also a part of *Manavi Hakka Abhiyan*, an organization run by Adv Eknath Awad, and worked at the grassroots level with the community. Though I located myself in one place, I kept moving to places where the respondents came from, wherever the events and functions were happening in the region. Most of my respondents are from villages and small towns of Beed, Ambejogai, Georai, Kaij, Majalgaon, Dharur, and Wadwani Talukas of the Beed district.

One of the crucial leaders G. S. Dada Kamble, who had contributed substantially to the conversion movement in the region, hails from the Nanded district and mostly lived in Aurangabad

²⁶ Around 80 percent of the population of the district resides in the rural area. Out of the total population of Beed district, 13.58 percent are Scheduled Caste population and 11.81 percent are Scheduled Tribe Population.

town and traveled across the region and State. Therefore, some of the respondents are also from neighboring districts to Beed, such as Aurangabad, Jalana, Latur, Parbhani, and Nanded districts. Since some of the respondents are also from neighboring districts of Beed that come under the Marathwada region, the study also extends to and represents the Marathwada region of Maharashtra.

Entry in the field:

A significant obstacle to ethnographic research is getting access to data. Feldman et al. (cited in Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:41)²⁷ suggest that "it often comes as a rude surprise to researchers who have not anticipated the difficulties that could be involved. It is often at its most acute in initial negotiations to enter a setting and during the 'first days in the field.'" However, the problem, and its associated issues, persist in some form or another during data collection. In most cases, I got leads about respondents and entry into the community through activist couple Ashok Tangade and Manisha Tokle.

Manisha Tai and Ashok Bhau worked with Adv Eknath Awad in Manavi Hakka Abhiyan-Campaign for Human Rights. They are an example of activist missionaries. Both are well-revered individuals in the activist circle and have a great network amongst like-minded people in anti-caste movements across the communities. Also, they are an inter-caste Buddhist couple who married in the early 1990s. My acquaintance with them came in 2013 when my family and I struggled as victims of caste atrocity. They helped and supported my family in our legal and social battles while dealing with caste atrocity cases. This also shows that the reach of their activism is not restricted or limited

²⁷ Atkinson, P. and Hammersley, M. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. Routledge

to the Beed district; they have reached beyond. Though I had heard about the work of Adv Awad and Manisha Tai before I met them personally, I got to see them closely and became more familiar with their activities and reach at the time of their engagement in our case.

During the pilot visit in 2017, I met Ashok Bhau and Manisha Tai again at their residence in Beed. They introduced me to the key leaders and individuals who are active in the anti-caste movement in the Marathwada region. Later I narrowed it down to those who are active in the Buddhist conversion movement. I classified them into three major categories. In the first category are those who have converted to Buddhism ritually, and in the second category are those who believe they are practicing the teachings of Buddha in their day-to-day lives and wish to convert but are not yet converted. Finally, some believe in the principles and teachings of Buddhism and practice those principles in their day-to-day life. For them, a conversion ritual is not essential; spiritual belief is enough and need not be converted ritually.

In the initial phase of fieldwork, the respondents and participants were skeptical about my intentions to pursue this research. Caste dynamics and insecurities about each other are the main reasons for their distrust. There is a strong belief in the community that their histories are distorted. It has always been one-sided whenever it comes to the confrontation of Caste. The oppressor has never presented the history of caste oppression by privileged castes. Marginalized communities have historically not been given due credit for their participation and contribution to the anti-caste movement. Therefore, to make them believe that I belong to the same community was a difficult task as the caste affiliation of the person can be identified based on surnames. Some surnames work as direct caste indicators, and some are ambiguous such as my surname, Ghadage. It is ambiguous as some of the upper Caste *Maratha* castes in the region have this surname. This put me in a suspicious category as upper Caste *Maratha*. My acquaintance with Ashok Bhau and

Manisha Tai made things easier to get acceptance, help, and support from the community during my fieldwork as they introduced me to the activist circle and assured them of my belonging to the neo-Buddhist identity. This eased the suspicious cloud over my identity and intentions behind taking up this research. The participants were okay with someone who shares the same identity and ideology and tried to explore and understand the conversion movement.

The activists and leaders used to inquire about me with Ashok Bhau and Manisha Tai as I used to give their references while establishing contacts to seek help from them in the fieldwork. They used to be cautious and inquire whether I had any connections with conflicting ideological camps such as RSS. For instance, Mr. Amarsingh Dhaka, the State Organizer of *Satyashodhak OBC Parishad* and a member of the *Samata Sainik Dal*, asked Ashok Bhau about me. He asked, "does this person here for his fieldwork, working on Buddhist conversion, have any connections with RSS and Sangha Parivar?"²⁸ Once the cloud of suspicion disappeared, activists offered me help. Mr. Dhaka, also working in the Indian Post as Assistant Post Master, helped me connect with Mr. Sandip Upare.²⁹

In the instance of Mr. Ajinkya Chandane, the State President of the Democratic Party of India, though I had an initial meeting with him, it had become difficult to seek his time for a formal interview. He used to give assurance that he would give his time in the coming days, but it was not happening. I used to attend and participate in events and functions at various places in the Beed district. I used to meet Mr. Chandane there. At one of the functions where the couple belonging to the *Matang* community was getting married in *Satyashodhak* way at Majalgaon, I met Mr. Ajinkya

²⁸ Field Notes, informal interaction with Ashok Tangade on 8th April 2018.

²⁹ Sandeep Upare is the current State President of *Satyashodhak OBC Parishad* and a younger son of the late Hanumant Upare- founder of *Satyashodhak OBC Parishad*.

Chandane again. As the wedding venue was away from the town and had limited commutation facilities, Ajinkya Chandane took me in his vehicle and dropped me at Majalgaon town. He also gave his appointment by himself and asked me to meet him at his residence the next day. As promised, he was at his residence the next day I met him. He confessed that he was skeptical about me as many people come to Beed intending to know more about the marginalized communities and their plight, the Dalit movement, and their activism with zero integrity. He reminded me of the importance of positioning oneself ethically with regard to research and the expectations on you by interlocutors when you are studying a social movement.

It is predictable for these leaders to be skeptical about the researchers and their honesty in dealing with sensitive topics such as religious conversion and Caste in a complex society like India, where caste biases are the reality. An outsider to indigenous communities has always done anthropological fieldwork. The subject of such fieldwork has always been powerless individuals or communities, and the researcher is always an outsider with vested power. It is scarce to see the marginalized communities doing fieldwork on upper castes as it is not easy for the marginalized communities to get access to the privileged upper caste life world. This is a reflection of the prevailing epistemological imperialism in social science practices in India. It enables non-Dalit or non-tribal to claim the new terrains that belong to the Dalit and Adivasi intellectual universe (Guru and Sarukkai, 2012, P.111).³⁰ Therefore, the way leaders and activists showed their discomfort and skepticism about the social location of the researcher and its purpose shows the changing power dynamics and the unwillingness to remain a mere object of research for the dominant caste people.

³⁰ Guru, Gopal and Sarukkai, Sundar. (2012). *The Cracked Mirror: an Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Here, in this case, I am Neo-Buddhist by identity; an insider has done the fieldwork. The way marginalized outsiders cannot access intimately closed realities of upper caste subjects and their life world, similarly authentic experiences, and rational realities and life world of marginalized communities cannot be accessed and understood and shared with outsiders. In this context, the narratives must be critically viewed and articulated by the researcher as an insider is methodologically essential. Therefore, this study would be an academic narrative produced by an insider to better understand the accounts and experiences of marginalized communities for academic purposes.

Observations and Participation:

As it is primarily ethnographic work, I used the observation method to collect primary data about conversion processes and life around it. It is also essential to decide about the field observations' place, time, and context to make them as systematic as possible (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 35).³¹ I used participative and non-participative observation methods as per the contexts to understand the processes involved in conversion, practices about Caste, and post-conversion religious life-world. I have participated in and observed day-to-day activities, processes, and events they organize to mobilize and politicize the community. I have participated in several Ambedkar Jayanti celebration programs organized by the community in different villages and closely observed them. Ashok Bhau and Manisha Tai were two important people who immensely supported me during my fieldwork. Manisha Tai gets invited to different villages on Ambedkar Jayanti as a guest speaker. She allowed me to travel with her and be part of the public meetings

³¹ Atkinson, P. and Hammersley, M. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. New York: Routledge.

she was addressing. This allowed me to participate in Ambedkar Jayanti programs and get acquainted with several activists and villagers.

I have also participated in the community's religious activities, which offer a common platform for the religious community to come together, lacking in the neo-Buddhist community comprised of different social groups in Maharashtra. For example, the Buddhist community in Beed town consciously organizes community gatherings at the residential places of newly converted Buddhists from the non-*Mahar* background every full moon day and offers *Buddha puja*. It was a unique platform for the Buddhist community to share the space and exchange ideas and thoughts to create bonds as the Buddhist community irrespective of their social location. The *Shramaner Shibir* organized for young participants was one of the critical religious activities communities regularly organize to deliver religious teaching to the next generation. I have observed those *shibirs* in Beed town organized by *Priyadarshi Dhamma Sanskar Shikshan Sanstha*.

Respondents asked me to stay back at their residence several times as no commutations were available late at night. This way, I got an opportunity to live with them, participate in their daily activities and observe them in their intimate space. However, not everything can be observed; some things needed a different methodological intervention. For instance, being male by gender, I have specific restrictions concerning participating and observing the socio-religious world of women participants in my research. Some of the life events and experiences individuals go through cannot be observed. The individuals must narrate it. To deal with such contexts, along with participant observations, I deployed the method of semi-structured interviews for the primary data collection.

Semi-Structured Interviews:

Semi-structured informal interviews of the converts from different caste backgrounds were conducted to collect primary data concerning the conversion process, construction of identity as Buddhist, and continuity in maintaining it. I interviewed 87 individuals coming from different social and educational backgrounds. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the help of an interview guide so that I would not miss any part from asking. The semi-structured interview has allowed for two-way interactions, and the open-ended nature of questions also allowed for seeking reasons for their answers.

I mostly interacted with peri-urban and rural communities, leaders, and activists who had just converted to Buddhism from non-Mahar castes. In addition, I had conversations with Buddhist leaders and activists who were originally members of the Mahar caste before they converted to Buddhism. I conversed with men and women of various age groups, representing young and older generations from rural and peri-urban backgrounds. They represented different social groups as they came from different castes and tribes. Constitutionally, they are categorized as SC, ST, and OBC. The major caste and tribe groups covered are *Matang, Chambhar, Mehetar, Mali, Lingayat, Bhavasar, Dhangar, Yellam, Gurav, Bhilla, Kaikadi, Paradhi*, etc. The names of the castes I mentioned here are only for informative purposes and denote their representation in the conversion movement. I do not intend to use these names contemptuously.

The interview schedule deployed for conducting interviews included a section that inquired about the socio-economic and educational background of the newly converted Buddhists from different caste backgrounds. I asked the respondents about their life journey, the decision to leave their previous religion, the reasons behind the decision, its necessity, and its importance. I also

asked them about historical context and background, the actual conversion, the event, life after conversion, the role of Buddhist Religious Institutions, how they maintain a new religious identity and contest graded inequality and caste hierarchy, etc. It was flexible interviews as I created space for spontaneity where the respondents could represent themselves.

Case study:

Data about the assertion of new religious identity in the context of conversion to other religions was collected through in-depth case studies. In-depth case studies also are collected relating to conversion and change of identity and experiences of people concerned. Sampling within cases is equally important as selecting cases for investigation. During this stage, we are not only determining which aspects of the case under investigation are and are not pertinent to the study at hand, but we are also, in most cases, extracting samples from the data that is already accessible in the case (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 35).³² The objective of categorizing cases is to deploy criteria that could be applied in an attempt to guarantee that data have been appropriately sampled and to reflect on any unintended sampling that may have taken place. This has been done to ensure adequate samples have been taken.

It is essential to mention that the respondents I was engaged with and those also featured in this thesis were not just crucial as respondents in my data collection process. However, they are also essential leaders, activists, practitioners, and scholars of their domain in the anti-caste movement. My constant engagements with Ashok Bhau and Manisha Tai during my fieldwork in Beed have played a crucial role in my understanding of the field. Both are activists, practitioners, and scholars with profound knowledge of the anti-caste movement. I interviewed Sandip Upare,

³² Atkinson, P. and Hammersley, M. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. New York: Routledge.

Ajinkya Chandane, Amarsigh Dhaka, G S Dada Kamble, Dr. Digambar Bobade, D S Narsinghe, Dharmaraj Majamule, Dhimant Rashtrapal, Ashok Palke, Prof. Vishnu Jadhav, Dr. Hamraj Uike, Laxman Gunjal, Sangameshwar Andhale, Prof Ram Gaikwad, Mangal Kamble, Sharda Hajare, Ganga Ghodke, Adv Sunanda Jadhav, Manisha Shendge, Savita Kamble, Manoj Kamble, Laxmikant Shinde. It has enabled me to understand the conversion process among non-*Mahar* communities and the interrelation between different communities within the fold of Buddhism.

Secondary Source of Data:

The circulation of written content significantly impacts the missionary movement to reach out to the masses. Therefore, I referred to the publications run by community leaders, who have played a crucial role in educating, mobilizing, and politicizing the community. Community publications, such as a monthly magazine called "*Tathagata*," run by *Satyashodhak Samaj Mahasangha*, reach households primarily belonging to the *Matang* community. I have also referred to publications in the form of flyers, booklets, and pamphlets circulated by the community to reach out to people and appeal to them.

There are recorded videos of the events that happened in the past and speeches delivered by community leaders and activists. Those who are not alive cannot be accessed in person; I relied on official YouTube channels and Facebook pages run by organizations and activists to access the contents. Their online content includes speeches and ideas shared by leaders and activists on public platforms. I was also added to the WhatsApp groups run by the organizations to communicate with the members about ongoing activities and other relevant information. They share videos, flyers, and messages addressing various issues and sharing information.

Internet sources and online journals and articles, library books, journals, and articles in newspapers and magazines have been used for secondary data collection. Published writings of Ambedkar are used for contextualizing the study of Buddhism accepted by new converts as Ambedkar gave it. Government gazetteers and data published officially have been used for getting authenticated information about constitutional identification and categorization of SCs, OBCs, and Tribals and their status. How are they identified in official documents?

Data analysis:

The approach to events and the facts that are methodologically explored through different methods has been focused on qualitative analysis. Field notes based on participant and non-participant observations, interviews, and in-depth case studies are crucial primary data sources. To analyze this qualitative data, I used the content analysis technique. Qualitative Data need to be coded to look for the emerging themes for further analysis. For the coding of data which is part of content analysis, I first transcribed all the interviews I took in Marathi. Later I translated all those transcribed interviews from Marathi to English and did coding.

I took a hybrid coding approach while coding the data as it allows the use of both deductive and inductive coding methods while coding the data (Fereday, Jennifer & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).³³ Deductive coding helped me focus on relevant data on different caste locations and their experiences in the conversion process. On the other hand, since the semi-structured interviews give open-ended answers, inductive coding helped me explore these open-ended responses and allowed

³³ Fereday, Jennifer & Muir-Cochrane, Eimear. (2006). Demonstrating Rigor Using Thematic Analysis: A Hybrid Approach of Inductive and Deductive Coding and Theme Development. *International Journal of Qualitative Research*, Vol. 5, Issue 1. Pp. 80-92.

me to go with the interview flow (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).³⁴ Further, descriptive coding has been done to encapsulate the general idea of data using a single word. It also helps trace back data and establishes a connection between the research problem and existing literature. The data coding helped systematically organize data as the primary codes were further clustered as per the themes that emerged from the codes. The Codes were formulated in such a way that it enables the data to answer the research questions. It also helped avoid duplication of data which generally happens as similar data keep coming from qualitative data.

Research Ethics in Data Collection:

I have not harmed them, physically or mentally, in any form that can cause them loss of dignity to anyone during this research study. Names of the villages, localities, areas, and names of individuals have been anonymized/ pseudonyms in this study to protect their privacy. The respondents' consent is critical to determining the ethical aspects of the research. I used to inform the respondents before starting the interviews as well as observation of events and programs about the purpose of the research.

I have taken prior permission of the respondents to record the interview and photograph the place and individuals on prior hand. I have also explained in detail the purpose of my research and how I will use the information they share. One of the experiences I had with the respondent was he narrated his experience of how researchers take out the wrong meanings from the information they share. He was apprehensive about how the researcher will interpret the information he was going to share. Therefore, he also demanded to see the final copy of the thesis

³⁴ Fereday, Jennifer & Muir-Cochrane, Eimear. (2006). Demonstrating Rigor Using Thematic Analysis: A Hybrid Approach of Inductive and Deductive Coding and Theme Development. *International Journal of Qualitative Research*, Vol. 5, Issue 1. Pp. 80-92.

once it was complete to know whether his narrative was used correctly. Therefore, I will share a copy of my thesis with my respondents who contributed to this thesis by sharing the information. It includes all such individuals I consulted and sought help from.

Chapter Schema:

The thesis has made an effort to show that Buddhism is not only practiced by members of one Caste but has evolved into a form of collective protest for Maharashtrians who are a part of numerous non-Mahar communities. People from various social backgrounds embrace Buddhism and express their opposition to the unfair caste norms. The thesis revolves around the struggle of marginalized identities in contesting Caste through religious conversion to Buddhism and proceeds through the following chapters. Apart from the Introduction chapter, this thesis has five major chapters and a concluding chapter.

Chapter One:

Caste, Religion, and Conversion: Survey of Literature

This chapter serves as the background for the further chapters coming in the thesis as it contextualizes the present work in the continuity of previous works in the fields of religion, Caste, and conversion in India. The chapter has discussed and categorized scholarly engagement on these issues into different themes. Early scholarly intervention (Dirk, 2003; Bayly, 1999, 1992; Dumont, 1972) about Caste theorized Caste as a foundation of the social system in the Indian subcontinent. They provided the sophisticated base to conceptualize Indian society as a social organization based on Caste during the colonial time, which other scholars further used to understand Indian society, its religions, and social formations. Scholars have studied Caste in India and highlighted its structurally oppressive nature.

Further, Caste has been studied as a social evil perpetuating social discrimination and inherited privileges. Ambedkar confronted the colonial approach to understanding caste and brought newer dimensions to understand Indian society. Scholars have argued that Caste was embedded in our culture before the British colonial invasion (Raj, 2022). Studies also underlined anti-caste and reformatory efforts from the past. Efforts taken by Indian spiritual leaders and saints such as the Bhakti movement and other anti-caste movements in different states, e.g., Varkari Sampraday of Maharashtra, Namasudra movement of Bengal, Ad Dharma movement of Punjab, Tamil Buddhist movement of Tamil Nadu, etc. are leading examples discussed by scholars like Viswanath (2014), Jodhka (2009), Omvedt (2008), Aloysius (1998), Juergensmeyer (1988), Bandyopadhyay (2004).

Scholars further demonstrated that when social reforms failed to reform Caste, the only solution they found was to discard Hinduism as a religion and its sacred texts or convert to some other religions (Peter van der Veer, 1996; Jaffrelot, 2004). Studies on conversion in India are predominantly based on Christian missionaries and some on Islamic conversion (Robinson, 2003; Clarke, 2003; Louis, 2007; Deshpande & Bapna, 2008). Critical studies such as that of Roberts (2016), Sanal Mohan (2015), Beltz (2005), and Gokhale (1986) focused on the conversion movement among Dalits as one of the strategies adopted by them for their emancipation, which resulted in the formation of multiple identities of Dalits. Studies also dealt with the intricacies of forming religious identity and its impact on their status.

Studies concerning Buddhism have focused more on Ambedkar and his vision of Buddhist India. The focus was also on Buddhist ideology and religion among converted *Mahar*. In the recent past, scholars have paid attention to Ambedkar's conversion movement to Buddhism and have seriously addressed the lived experiences of new converts in their daily lives. Mainly western

scholars highlighted this cultural revolution of modern times. Zelliott (1996), Omvedt (2003), Jaffrelot (2004), and Braj Ranjan Mani (2015) these scholars have dealt with the Dalit experiences of conversion and their significance. Some of the studies dealt with the contribution of conversion in the socio-economic-political spheres of life of the converts and called it emancipatory (Aloysius, 2015). Studies have broadly focused on how Dalits have represented the conversion issue and resented the understanding and meaning of conversion as understood by the converts (Beltz, 2005).

Chapter Two:

Debating Religion and Conversion: Contextualizing Buddhist Discourse in India

This chapter examines the theoretical background and debates on conversion in India. It deals with theoretical aspects of religion as a western concept and its applicability to Buddhism. While debating whether Buddhism can be called a religion, Dr. Ambedkar's view on religion and Buddhism has been brought to discussion. This chapter explores Ambedkar's conception of Buddhism as Dhamma and how it differs from Hindu notions of Dharma. Like religion, conversion is also a western concept and is the contribution of the missionary religion of Christianity to the discipline of religious studies (Berger & Sahoo, 2020). How conversion is perceived in and done in Buddhism is briefly discussed. The emphasis is given more on conversion as a personal choice and conscious decision without any influence of external factors in Buddhism.

In the Indian context, religious conversion is always termed a violent act as it is believed that the conversion disturbs the social fabric and age-old local traditions of the place it is being done. The arguments from orthodox Hindu scholarship create debate about how the conversion has been portrayed as a conflict between missionary and non-missionary religions. Contrary to the negative articulations about conversion as a violent act, some studies have shown conversion in a

positive light. They claim conversion has boosted social mobility among Dalits and played an essential role in the liberation of downtrodden communities in India.

Debates, however, do not stop here; some studies claim that though conversion has brought social mobility among the marginalized section of society, they have left within their caste groups in new religion even after conversion. Caste and untouchability continue to reproduce in the new religions in insidious forms. They have shown this through empirical studies on Christianity and Islam in India. Caste as a social reality has kept generating newer forms of Dalit exclusion. Keeping in mind this empirical reality of Caste in India, this chapter problematizes the caste question. This chapter covers the importance of Buddhism as an anti-caste philosophy and a means of social protest against what is perceived as a repressive, unjust social caste system.

Chapter Three:

Ambedkarites in Making: The Process of Awakening among Non-*Mahar* Communities in Maharashtra

This chapter deals with the post-Ambedkar development of the Ambedkarite anti-caste movement in Maharashtra and the Marathwada region of Maharashtra. As most Buddhist converts belonged to the *Mahar* community, it is evident that most academic narratives on Buddhist conversion in Maharashtra revolved around *Mahar*. Nevertheless, this shift was needed as the conversion movement exceeded the Mahar domination and entered the non-Mahar arena. Ambedkar as a persona has left a more significant impact on the anti-caste Ambedkarite movement in contemporary Maharashtra. It influenced individuals to take up organized efforts to reach out and take the anti-caste movement to the masses in their capacities.

This chapter dwells upon the post-Ambedkar development of the Ambedkarite anti-caste movement in Maharashtra and the Marathwada region of Maharashtra specifically, which has a grip on the anti-caste activists and the leaders coming from non-Mahar castes. The chapter has briefly discussed the journeys of these non-*Mahar* leaders in the process of becoming Ambedkarites and further taking the ideology of Ambedkarism to their respective communities in various ways. Marathwada, as the region, has seen many events and movements like BAMCEF and Namantar Movement, and violence inflicted upon the Dalit community post-Namantar event has a more significant impact on the region.

This chapter has also briefly discussed the effects of such activities on the emergence of an anti-caste leadership in the Marathwada region, who took on the duty of upholding Ambedkar's vision in their specific communities. This chapter also provides a brief overview of the leaders' personal histories, including their role in mobilizing the public to support anti-caste ideologies and later in the Buddhist conversion campaign and actual conversion to Buddhism.

Chapter Four:

Activist Missionary: Strengthening the roots of Buddhism amongst non-Mahar communities in the Marathwada region

The previous chapter highlighted how Buddhist discourse in Maharashtra has shifted from the former untouchable caste *Mahars* to other non-*Mahar* communities as an expression of protest and emancipation. It was an organized effort of activists and community leaders to reach out to the masses and convince them of Buddhist conversion. Therefore, the fourth chapter explores this process of political socialization through which people have been prepared for religious conversion

to Buddhism. Activists have done missionary work to take Buddhism to masses belonging to non-Mahar castes. Ambedkar envisioned it as Activist Missionaries.

This chapter has explored the formation of the activist missionary and their conscious efforts to highlight the oppression and exploitation by the upper Caste and see their emancipation through Buddhism. This kind of conscious effort of mobilization and politicization of communities from various actors of social change led them to take one common way: Buddhism. This chapter argues that religious sanctity to caste-based inequality and atrocities and discrimination based on Caste forms the basis against which people from marginalized castes are mobilizing and revolting. This chapter has also discussed the different approaches the activists have adopted to interact with anti-caste ideology and the politicization of communities.

Chapter Five:

Buddhism in Practice: The challenge of confronting Caste and reconstructing society

After overcoming the initial barrier presented by the conversion rituals, the Buddhist converts face the test of their faith. Therefore, this chapter looked at how the converted Buddhists' thoughts, beliefs, and actions led to the reconstruction of the society from the perspective of caste annihilation and how it reflected in the anti-caste movement from different directions. The role of individual change and system change is unique in any movement which aims for social change. Suppose we change the individuals and not the oppressive social order. In that case, the person who lives according to the new values becomes lonely, excluded, and suffocated in society following the old values. At the same time, if there is no change in the individual and just changing the oppressive social order and the social system, then the changed system is in danger of being

undone by the unchanged person as the individual is the means to implement the changed value.³⁵ Challenging this domination/hegemony is a separate struggle that one must undergo daily. This chapter also focuses on the experiences of caste dominations faced by oppressed identities. It highlights their struggle and how they contest this domination through Buddhism as a religion that preaches equality as a fundamental principle for human existence.

Parallel to protesting caste inequalities, it is crucial to see how the issue of gender inequality and discrimination based on gender is dealt with in Buddhism. Thus, the question of women's emancipation through Buddhism is covered in this chapter. Scholars have considered Buddhism to be an anti-caste religion and have assumed that it contests the Caste patriarchy and liberates its women adherents from the constraints of oppression. Therefore, this chapter has narrated the experiences of Buddhist women breaking the caste boundaries and recorded their experiences about the changes in the culture that provided them with dignity in their life and the society they lived in after conversion to Buddhism.

³⁵ Dhammasangini, Rama Gorakh. (2011: 125). Unpublished Ph.D. thesis in Marathi titled '*Maharashtratil Baudh Striyanchya moukhik Etihasache Strivadi Akalan*,' thesis submitted to Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune.

Chapter One

Caste, Religion, and Conversion: Survey of Literature

This chapter serves as the background of this study as it contextualizes the present work in the continuity of previous scholarly interventions in the study of religion, caste, and conversion. This chapter has discussed the scholarly works in a narrative form per categories revealed from the literature on anti-caste struggle and contestation of caste in India.

Caste as a foundation of the social system in the Indian sub-continent:

Caste has always remained the most controversial topic in India. Usually, caste has been treated as a source of embarrassment as it stands for the hierarchy among humans and discrimination based on one's birth in a particular caste. It was either neglected and sidelined or made to discussions only in the context of problematizing affirmative action policies based on caste in India. It was barely accepted that caste needs academic attention (Guru, 2016, p. 31).³⁶ Caste in India has always remained an internal issue to be solved without external intervention.

Moreover, even speaking or writing about caste in various contexts has been considered one of the many reasons for the persistence of caste in India today. Not talking about caste makes one casteless is the popular conception of privileged castes. Therefore, debating caste and discussing its merit, demerit, functionality, and structural discrimination embedded in it is also considered as something that can perpetuate caste.³⁷

³⁶ Guru, Gopal. (2016). The Indian Nation in its Egalitarian Conception, in Rawat, Ramnarayan and Satyanarayana, K. (eds). *Dalit Studies*. London: Duke University Press.

³⁷ See Rawat, Ramnarayan S and Satyanarayana, K. (2016:13-14). *Dalit Studies*. London: Duke University Press.

Against the popular narrative that caste is an innately 'illegitimate' subject as untouchability and caste discrimination have been abolished as per the supreme law of the land, caste has been vehemently discussed, argued, and problematized as a fact of life by marginalized communities. 'Caste variable' was restricted to ghettos and was never widely recognized until foreign scholars at the international level brought it out through their academic exploration in empirical and conceptual research.³⁸ Academic intervention from western academics further theorized the Indian social system as a caste society that became the base for conceptualizing Indian society. Dumont's primary anthropological intervention is one of the significant contributions in providing 'caste as a religious principle' as the framework that many scholars in the social science domain followed in their work to explore caste in academic pursuit. In his claim that caste is the foundation of Indian society, Dumont (1979)³⁹ makes the assumption that the ruling caste's ideologically driven vision of social order is a given social reality.

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (2004:11) argued that "western scholars struggled to grapple with the complexities of Indian social organization when they tried to explore it through their academic pursuits. These early Orientalist scholars and missionaries believed that religion was the primary basis of social organization in the Indian subcontinent, which became a stereotype later officially recognized and legitimated by the colonial empirical inquiries of the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries."⁴⁰ M N Srinivas (1996:X) refers to research interventions that favor flexibility in a local hierarchy in pre-British India. Therefore, Srinivas argues that pre-British India's caste was not a rigid institution. He says that there was always a possibility for 'strategically located

³⁸ See Jodhka, Surinder. (2018: xix). *Caste in Contemporary India*. New York: Routledge.

³⁹ Dumont, Louis. (1979). *Homo Hierarchicus*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

⁴⁰ Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar. (2004). *Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Domination in Colonial Bengal*, New Delhi. Sage Publication.

groups' to change their strata in caste hierarchy by capturing political power, land ownership, trade, and migration to other regions.⁴¹

Dirks was one of the academics who criticized Dumont's paradigm for casting society as a purity-pollution conflict that creates a sacral order with a concentration on social practices of differentiation and discrimination. Caste and religion are political, according to Dirks (2003),⁴² who also asserted that these categories shaped identities in their interaction with colonial modernity. Bandyopadhyay (2004)⁴³ agrees with Dirks' critique and links caste identity to census activity and colonial ethnography as significantly creating identities for developing colonial knowledge. This perspective of caste as a fabrication of colonial discourse enables the view that caste had no actual existence before the intrusion of colonial power. Colonial practice of census seems to categorize caste and freeze it to existing social relations. It further generated the difference through methods like systematizing castes to make institutional arrangements like affirmative action through the reservation of electorates and seats etc.

Nicholas Dirks (2003)⁴⁴ theorizes caste as the product of Western colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent. The complicated and complex social organization of regions like the Indian subcontinent was further categorized based on religion and caste during the colonial period. Dirks (2003:5) argues that "caste became a single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all

⁴¹ Srinivas, M. N. (ed.). (1997: X). *Caste: Its Twentieth-Century Avatar*. Viking: Penguin Books.

⁴² Dirks, Nicholas. (2003). *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Princeton and Delhi: Princeton University Press and Permanent Black.

⁴³ Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar. (2004). *Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Domination in Colonial Bengal*, New Delhi. Sage Publication.

⁴⁴ Dirks, Nicholas. (2003). *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Princeton and Delhi: Princeton University Press and Permanent Black.

'systematizing' India's diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization" under the British and argued that colonialism created India's caste system as its central symbol.

Dirks (2003:8) further identifies that "British colonialism played a critical role in the identification and production of Indian tradition by working through an Orientalist idea of caste. He further argues that under colonialism, caste was made out to be far more persuasive, far more totalizing, and far more uniform."⁴⁵ In the early twentieth century, the social identity of caste was heavily politicized and exploited as a tool for mobilization. Because of this, Dirks historicizes the conditions of the British colonial administration to analyze the ethnographic state's enumerative technology of the census and the ethnography survey, which resulted in caste as a modern political category by the late nineteenth century.

The scholarships emerged in India during post-colonial intervention among the western educated Indian elites almost exclusively from the traditional upper castes (Jodhka, 2018: xix).⁴⁶ The orientalist's understanding of the caste as a colonial construct goes well with this elite scholarship representing a privileged upper caste narrative. Though these frameworks have been used in understanding Indian social systems, scholars have also criticized and vehemently opposed them. Jayaseelan Raj (2022:2-3)⁴⁷ argues that Dirks misinterpreted Cohn's position on caste. Dirks argued that 'caste was not a fundamental phenomenon that governed the Indian history before the British rule.' According to Raj, Cohn maintained that the extensive survey and census initiatives carried out by the colonial administration served to recreate social categories to support colonial

⁴⁵ Dirks, Nicholas. (2003). *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Princeton and Delhi: Princeton University Press and Permanent Black.

⁴⁶ Jodhka, Surinder. (2018: xix). *Caste in Contemporary India*. New York: Routledge.

⁴⁷ Raj, Jayaseelan (2022). Post-colonial Caste, Ambedkar, and the politics of counter-narrative. *History and Anthropology*, Vol.33, No. 2, April 2022. pp. 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2022.2096021>

control (Quoted in Raj, 2022, p. 3). However, the interpretation of caste by Dirks became popular in the post-colonial contribution of scholarships on caste. It became a significant direction among scholars dealing with the caste in post-colonial India. According to Raj, Dirks relied on early writings and practices of colonial bureaucracy and Christian missionaries to substantiate his thesis. Therefore, it was more like an ethnography of the colonial state and not an ethnography of colonized subjects having human agency (Raj, 2022, p. 4).⁴⁸

Five of Dr. Ambedkar's influential writings, including *The Untouchables* (1948), *Who were the Shudras* (1946), *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), *Caste in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development* (1916), and *Revolution and Counter-revolution in ancient India* (1987), reflect his understanding of caste. Ambedkar's understanding of the reproduction of caste is primarily aimed at exploring the origin of caste, reasons for its persistence, and strategies for its abolition or annihilation. His epistemology was based mainly on a genealogy of cultural practices such as rituals, endogamy, child marriage, *sati* practice, widowhood, and inter-caste dining (Raj, 2022, p. 4).⁴⁹ For Ambedkar, caste is not a singular notion; it exists only concerning each other. Endogamy is one of the essential features of the caste.

Without the ritualistic practice of endogamy, castes cannot survive. Caste, therefore, is exclusive but not an isolated category. It requires each caste to demarcate themselves from others, and maintaining boundaries became another vital feature of the caste system. People who transgress these boundaries used to face stringent punishment. These punishments are codified in Manusmriti, making penalties for the breach of caste obligations sacred. Ambedkar located these

⁴⁸ Raj, Jayaseelan. (2022:4). Post-colonial Caste, Ambedkar, and the politics of counter-narrative. *History and Anthropology*, Vol.33, No. 2, April 2022. pp. 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2022.2096021>

⁴⁹ Ibid (2022:4)

sacrileges as interlinkages between caste and religion, which made Hinduism a religion of caste organizations. That puts every caste into isolated groups, prohibiting them from having any social interaction except that of labor. It ultimately resulted in a lack of solidarity among different caste groups, which can be termed a unified Hindu subject. Therefore, there is no "feeling that it is affiliated to other castes except when there is a Hindu-Muslim riot (Ambedkar, 1979, p. 50)."⁵⁰ Dr. Ambedkar highlighted the falseness of unity in diversity notion in caste society and the pseudo-unity among them.

Scholars further used the framework given by M N Srinivas to understand Caste. According to Srinivas (1956),⁵¹ the castes considered lower or impure try to imitate caste practices followed by upper or pure castes to claim or rise in the social hierarchy. Srinivas suggests through his theory of Sanskritization that there was no violence involved in parting caste practices among Hindus. There was an emphasis on harmonious change through ritual adaptation over social antagonism. Srinivas redescribes the framework Ambedkar used while addressing the imitation factor in learning caste behavior in his iconic paper caste in India.

Ambedkar, before Srinivas, argued that imposing caste on everyone is impossible. Caste was not forcefully imposed on people but was invented by Brahmins, and later others imitated it as they were kept away from Brahmanical ritualistic lifeworld. Ambedkar invoked psychological aspects to understand the imitation part of caste behavior (1979:3-22).⁵² Jayaseelan Raj (2022:5)⁵³

⁵⁰ Ambedkar, B R. (1979:50). *Annihilation of Caste*, In Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 1. New Delhi, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra.

⁵¹ Srinivas, M.N. (1956). A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization. *Far Eastern Quarterly*. 15. (4), 481-496.

⁵² Ambedkar, B.R. (1979:3-22). *Caste in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis, and Development*, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 1. New Delhi, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra.

⁵³ Raj, Jayaseelan (2022:5). Post-colonial Caste, Ambedkar, and the politics of counter-narrative. *History and Anthropology*, Vol.33, No. 2, April 2022. pp. 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2022.2096021>

further added to the claim that the caste system was perpetuated partly by different caste groups. However, because the Brahman castes were primarily responsible for the practices they started and their influence was felt in both the political and religious spheres, the caste system was fundamentally based on the ideals it upheld.

Caste is a much more complex phenomenon than represented in western scholarship as an oriental view of caste has evolved. However, scholars have argued that the simplified version of caste took shape during the colonial period. It took different forms at different times and continued to persist. Nevertheless, core ideas around which the concept of caste is organized remained the same through different stages of the evolution of caste. Jodhka listed those core ideas: such as physical segregation of castes and ghettoization of communities based on their location in the caste hierarchy, notions of purity and pollution, economic disparities, and social inequalities as a result of deprivation of communities from material aspects of life and institutionalized violence (Jodhka, 2018, p. 4).⁵⁴

While dealing with caste, post-colonial scholarship focused primarily on ethnographic details of colonizers and the orientalist narrative of caste and overlooked the 'anti-caste epistemology' of marginalized caste. Raj (2022:4)⁵⁵ observes that the post-colonial history of caste has overlooked the anti-caste critical perspective developed by Dr. Ambedkar as it does not go well with post-colonial anti-imperialism agenda of academics on critical caste studies, which scathingly attacked colonial intervention for the fixing and formalizing caste into Indian social system. Ambedkar's anthropological orientation toward caste is clear in his strategy for

⁵⁴ Jodhka, Surinder. (2018: 4). *Caste in Contemporary India*. New York: Routledge.

⁵⁵ Raj, Jayaseelan (2022:4). Post-colonial Caste, Ambedkar, and the politics of counter-narrative. *History and Anthropology*, Vol.33, No. 2, April 2022. pp. 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2022.2096021>

emancipating untouchables. In order to end caste humiliation, Ambedkar proposed abandoning Vedic rituals as the answer to the caste problem. Ambedkar's interpretation of caste as an anthropological construct evolved into an epistemic critique of caste (Nigam, 2000)⁵⁶ that transcends the post-colonial understanding of caste as a colonial construction. Further, it became a foundation for the post-Ambedkar conversion movement in India.

The egalitarian ethos of Bhakti Tradition and resistance to caste inequalities:

It is popularly believed that with the advent of colonial rule, Christian missionary work, and western education, modernity entered the Indian subcontinent. In this phase of modernity, it was expected that religion would fade its importance as it was conceptualized as a negative influence and often viewed as a hindrance to ensuring the progress and development of the 'pre-modern' societies (Jodhka & Kumar, 2010, p. 6).⁵⁷ In the times when being developed and modern meant there was no scope for religion. The secularization of public life and institutions following scientific rationality gained center stage. That means there was a decline in the role of religion in public life, and it was reduced to the private affairs of individuals. However, this notion has been extensively criticized, and theories of modernity faced a challenge from scholars underlining the role of religion even in modern societies.

There has been a steady shift from treating religion negatively to religion as a means of protest and social change. Jodhka and Kumar (2010) have pointed out that religion has always been a crucial source of inspiration for people, inspiring them to mobilize, sometimes against

⁵⁶ Quoted in Raj, Jayaseelan (2022:6). Post-colonial Caste, Ambedkar, and the politics of counter-narrative. *History and Anthropology*, Vol.33, No. 2, April 2022. pp. 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2022.2096021>

⁵⁷ Jodhka, Surinder and Kumar, Avinash (2010:6). Religious Mobilization for development and Social Change: A Comparative Study of Dalit Movement in Punjab and Maharashtra, India. *Religion and Development Research Program*, Working Paper- 47, International Development Department, University of Birmingham. Pp. 1-101.

reforms, sometimes to fight change. However, religion has also inspired people to demand social change reforms (Jodhka & Kumar, 2010, p. 6).⁵⁸ However, a lot of studies on religion and discussions in the public sphere focus on the so-called major religious traditions like Christianity, Islam, or Hinduism and pay less attention to the "small traditions" (Jodhka & Kumar, 2010).

Alongside western religious intervention and its association with the modern egalitarian value system and philosophy, scholars have also highlighted the contributions of Indian spiritual leaders and the *Bhakti* movement in problematizing and attacking inequality based on caste. The *Bhakti* movement attracted some marginalized communities into their folds in India (Omvedt & Patankar, 2012).⁵⁹ Scholars have underlined anti-caste and reformatory efforts of such traditions from the past as old as going back to the early modern period of the fifteenth century (Burchett, 2009).⁶⁰ *Varkari Sampradaya* of Maharashtra, the *Ravidasi/ Valmiki* movement, and *Kabir Panth* of northern states are the leading examples of indigenous movements that challenged caste-based inequalities in the religious domain through the *Bhakti* movement.

Braj Ranjan Mani says *Bhakti* traditions are seen as simmering tension between the liberal-humanist *sramanic*- seekers tradition and the conservative-exclusivist Brahmanism. *Bhakti* tradition flourished in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in the northern part of India with the emergence of important saint-poets like Kabir, Ravidas, Dadu, and Nanak, among many others

⁵⁸ Jodhka, Surinder and Kumar, Avinash (2010:6). Religious Mobilization for development and Social Change: A Comparative Study of Dalit Movement in Punjab and Maharashtra, India. *Religion and Development Research Program*, Working Paper- 47, International Development Department, University of Birmingham. Pp. 1-101.

⁵⁹ Omvedt, Gail and Patankar, Bharat. (2012). *The Songs of Tukoba*. New Delhi: Manohar.

⁶⁰ Burchett, Patton. (2009). Bhakti Rhetoric in the Hagiography of 'Untouchable' Saint: Discerning Bhakti's Ambivalence on Caste and Brahminhood. *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2, (August 2009), pp. 115-141.

(2015:140).⁶¹ These Saint-poets challenged caste and supremacy attached to birth through their writings and poetry composed in people's language. Ideologically these movements relate to early sramanic resistance. It also represents the revival of Buddha's dhamma and his resistance to Brahmanism (2015:141).⁶² In addition to discussing Bhakti resistance, Braj Ranjan Mani's analytical work walks us through the historical causes of Brahmanical supremacy as well as the counter-tradition of resistance that dates back to Buddha and continued into the modern era of Mahatma Phule and Ambedkar. Understanding caste's enduring power, but also opposition to it through centuries, requires an understanding of the dialectical interaction between the Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical lifeworlds (Raj, 2022).⁶³

Gail (2008:7),⁶⁴ in her work '*Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anti-caste Intellectuals*,' argues that before western modernity reached the Indian sub-continent, the first formulation of an Indian version of utopia came from the anti-caste intellectuals and Bhakti radical Sant Ravidas. Through his song *Begumpura*- the city without hierarchy where all are equal, Sant Ravidas gives an Indian version of the utopia of the casteless and classless society. It is an idealistic egalitarian society imagined by Indian saints. Though this movement emerged in the northern part of India, it subsequently spread across the country. The Sant poets shared striking similarities concerning the 'egalitarian ethos' of the anti-caste movement.

⁶¹ Braj Ranjan Mani, (2015). *Debrahmanising history: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society*. Manohar: New Delhi.

⁶² Braj Ranjan Mani, (2015). *Debrahmanising history: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society*. New Delhi: Manohar.

⁶³ Raj, Jayaseelan, (2022). Post-colonial Caste, Ambedkar, and the politics of counter-narrative. *History and Anthropology*, Vol.33, No. 2, April 2022. pp. 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2022.2096021>

⁶⁴ Omvedt, Gail, (2008:7). *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anti-caste Intellectuals*. Navayana Publications: New Delhi.

The *Bhakti* movement had a rebellious nature and advocated equality and social justice. However, it was confined to the religious domain and never translated to social life as caste continued to be practiced by upholding caste occupations and internalizing the practice of untouchability in day-to-day life (Burchett, 2009, p. 116).⁶⁵ Zelliott (1992:7)⁶⁶ referred to *Abhangs* (poems) of Sant Chokhamela⁶⁷ in which his caste locations and the hardships he had to go through as someone from a lower caste society was mentioned. It denotes that Sant Chokhamela had accepted his place in the caste hierarchy as someone belonging to the *Mahar* caste and the servant of the village.

As Burchett (2009:116)⁶⁸ argued, the significant rejection of caste was not common among *Bhakti* tradition, it was only *Vira Saivism*, and among it, Kabir and Ravidas Panths opposed caste. Even in these sects, the opposition never translated from ideology to practice. Therefore, the *Bhakti* tradition had limited its reach to a utopia of equality in God's eyes. The concept of equality with other bhaktas- devotees could not garner more support from marginalized communities as the Brahmanical practices kept exploiting the marginalized. However, the *Bhakti* tradition has shown the path of an egalitarian society that impacts communities. *Bhakti* traditions remained relevant, at least in challenging Brahmanical supremacy and democratizing the devotional path to the salvation of marginalized communities.

⁶⁵ Burchett, Patton. (2009). Bhakti Rhetoric in the Hagiography of 'Untouchable' Saint: Discerning Bhakti's Ambivalence on Caste and Brahminhood. *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp.115-141.

⁶⁶ Zelliott, Eleanor (1992:7). *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*. Manohar Publication: New Delhi.

⁶⁷ A thirteenth-fourteenth century Bhakti tradition saint from warkari sampradaya of Maharashtra belonging to ex-untouchable caste Mahar.

⁶⁸ Burchett, Patton. (2009). Bhakti Rhetoric in the Hagiography of 'Untouchable' Saint: Discerning Bhakti's Ambivalence on Caste and Brahminhood. *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2, (August, 2009), pp115-141.

Colonial intervention and emergence of resistance from oppressed castes:

The colonial period is termed a foreign rule and a period of repression. Many movements emerged during that time, countering and resisting colonial rule in India. All such movements that largely sprouted from anti-colonial sentiments were broadly categorized as nationalist or freedom movements (Jodhka & Kumar, 2010, p. 8).⁶⁹ However, not all the movements that emerged during colonial times draw their motivation from anti-colonial sentiment. Instead, Colonial rule brought with them English education, western philosophy, and modernity, which helped marginalized communities find their voice and raise their issues and concerns about caste inequalities and the associated inhuman practices. They went on to challenge the barbaric social practices and unequal social structures such as caste and discrimination associated with it. The nationalist struggle or the freedom struggle was seeking freedom from colonial rulers. In contrast, the freedom struggle of India's majority classes was against colonial power and Brahmanical hegemonies.

Many scholars have sufficiently demonstrated that educated Indians influenced by English education; started to feel the difference between the progressive ideas of the west and stagnant Hindu thoughts (Rai, 1979, p. 906).⁷⁰ That marked the beginning of the Indian renaissance in the socio-religious reforms movement. Several leaders and scholars from marginalized sections of society began to problematize caste in India and highlighted its structurally oppressive nature during colonial times. Mahatma Phule, one of the pioneering figures of social revolutions, founded the '*Satyashodhak Samaj*-the truth-seeking society' in 1873 with a vision of forming a just and

⁶⁹ Jodhka, Surinder and Kumar, Avinash (2010:8). Religious Mobilization for development and Social Change: A Comparative Study of Dalit Movement in Punjab and Maharashtra, India. *Religion and Development Research Program*, Working Paper- 47, International Development Department, University of Birmingham. Pp. 1-101.

⁷⁰ Rai, Kauleshwar. (1979). British Attitude Towards Social Reforms in Modern India. *Indian History Congress*, Vol. 40, pp.904-907.

casteless society by parting ways with organizations such as the *Prarthana Sabha* and the *Brahmo Samaj* (Omvedt, 2008, pp. 161-62).⁷¹ Phule led the non-brahmin movement against social inequality, sidelined by the popular freedom movement of the time. Phule's *Satyashodhak* movement took an organizational way to mobilize subordinate castes against brahmin domination by founding '*Sarvajanik Satya Dharma*,' a protestant religion that paved the foundation for other anti-caste movements such as the neo-Buddhist/Dalit movement in Maharashtra (Beltz, 2005; Joshi, 1986; Omvedt, 1971, 2008; Zelliott, 1992).

A similar movement had emerged in Southern India under Iyothee Thassar in Madras around 1892 (Aloysius, 2015).⁷² Iyothee Thassar did not join the *Madras Mahajan Sabha* and the Madras Congress and founded the '*Shakya Buddhist Society*' in 1892. Before starting the Shakya Buddhist Society, he was associated with the reformist movement through Advaitananda Sabha during the Madras presidency (Omvedt, 2008, p. 192-93).⁷³ Like Phule's Aryan and non-Aryan binaries and claim of native or original settlers to low caste masses, Thassar also believed that Tamils are native/original settlers and have been Buddhist since the time of Ashoka- the emperor.

Aloysius (2015:148)⁷⁴ brought different arguments for understanding the hegemonies ruling on subaltern religious-cultural traditions. He argued that subaltern traditions under colonial times were essentially facing erosion as Christian missionaries had become the hegemonic model during the colonial period through the process of 'semitizaisation.' They started to dominate all the

⁷¹ Omvedt, Gail, (2008). *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anti-caste Intellectuals*. Navayana Publications: New Delhi.

⁷² Aloysius, G. (2015). *Iyothee Thassar and Tamil Buddhist Movement: Religion as Emancipatory Identity*. New Delhi: Critical Quest.

⁷³ Omvedt, Gail, (2008). *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anti-caste Intellectuals*. Navayana Publications: New Delhi.

⁷⁴ Aloysius, G. (2015). *Iyothee Thassar and Tamil Buddhist Movement: Religion as Emancipatory Identity*. New Delhi: Critical Quest.

Indian religious traditions, resulting in the construction of 'Hinduism' as counter-hegemonic religion primarily from Brahmanism.

Now, the foreign, as well as local/native hegemonies, started to homogenize autonomous subaltern cultures. Christian missionaries offered a certain degree of social equality, but it came at the cost of giving up on subaltern traditions and heritage as superstition (Aloysius, 2015, p. 149).⁷⁵ On the other hand, the newfound Hinduism was willing to extend the title of Hindu but not without conferring them the status of subcastes with bondage. In this context, where subaltern masses were caught between the two hegemonies of local and foreign, Iyothee Thassar resorted to Buddhism as an alternative counter-hegemony that offered them religious ideology and identity.

Aloysius quoted P.L. Narasu, who says, "What is important in his (Buddhas) eyes was not his form but his character, the embodiment in the practical life of the ideas of compassion and wisdom (Aloysius, 2015, p. 152)."⁷⁶ Thus, Buddhism helped subaltern masses conserve/revive their subaltern traditions through Buddhist counter-hegemony based on the liberating aspects of subaltern traditions (Aloysius, 2015, p. 149).⁷⁷ Though Buddhism in Tamil Nadu did not gain much momentum, it created space for counter-hegemony to foreign and local hegemonies. In the later phase of the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu, Periyar, the founder of the anti-Brahmin movement, took the cue from Thassar's counter-hegemony and played a crucial role in dismantling Brahminic hegemony in Tamil Nadu (Pandian, 1996).⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Aloysius, G. (2015). *Iyothee Thassar and Tamil Buddhist Movement: Religion as Emancipatory Identity*. New Delhi: Critical Quest.

⁷⁶ Aloysius, G. (2015). *Iyothee Thassar and Tamil Buddhist Movement: Religion as Emancipatory Identity*. New Delhi: Critical Quest.

⁷⁷ Ibid (2015).

⁷⁸ Pandian, MSS. (1996). Towards National-Popular: Notes on self-Respecters Tamil. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 31 (51), pp 3323-29.

On similar grounds of rejuvenating and conserving of native/local religion and heritage of Punjabi people belonging to low castes, the *Ad-Dharma* movement in the state of Punjab during colonial times came into existence under the leadership of Mangoo Ram. As argued by Juergensmeyer (1974:170),⁷⁹ the primary aim of the Ad-Dharma movement was to give an alternative agenda to marginalized castes. He argued that the *Ad-Dharma* movement stood for the worship of only their traditional gurus and revived their sense of historical origins. It opposed the caste, demanded better economic conditions, set forth its organization's rules and principles, and denigrated the upper caste reform organizations. Though the *Ad-Dharma* movement was led by untouchables and shared a similar vision as that of previous social revolutionaries who tried to counter the local hegemonies with alternative movements, it differs from theirs. Ronki Ram (2012:639)⁸⁰ argued that Dalit social mobility in Punjab had emerged independently of religious conversions to neo-Buddhism and Sanskritization agendas.

Phule's *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma* and Iyothee Thassar's *Sakya Buddhist Society* were the socio-religious movements that emerged in colonial India, countering Brahmanical hegemonies and becoming an alternative to the colonial missionary religion of Christianity. Phule did not directly go to Buddhism, but his *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma* was based entirely on Buddha's teaching. He saw Buddha as people's savior and Buddhism as antithetical to Brahmanism (Braj Ranjan Mani, 2015, p. 257).⁸¹ Unlike the Bhakti movement, which restricted their arena to religious reformations, Phule and Thassar rejected the Brahmanical hegemonies in religious rituals

⁷⁹ Juergensmeyer, Mark. (1974: 170). PhD Thesis, titled, 'Political Hope: The Quest for Political Identity and Strategy in the Social Movement of North India's Untouchables, 1900-1970', Submitted to Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley.

⁸⁰ Ram, Ronki. (2012). Beyond Conversion and Sanskritization: Articulating an Alternative Dalit Agenda in East Punjab. *Modern Asian Studies*, 46, 3 (2012), pp. 639-702.

⁸¹ Quoted in Braj Ranjan Mani, (2015). *Debrahmanising history: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society*. New Delhi: Manohar.

and practices but also searched for new religious ideologies as solutions for hegemonic Brahmanical social practices as part of their social revolutions.

Most other social reform movements like Brahmo Samaj, The Arya Samaj, and Prarthana Samaj, though they were radical in their approach, tend to find their basis either in Upanishads or Vedas- the sacred religious scripture of Hinduism. Phule strongly believed that Brahmanical scriptures, including Vedas and Upanishads, were written by the priestly class to exploit the low caste and non-Brahmin classes. Phule's *Satyashodhak Samaj*, Thassar's *Sakya Buddhist Society*, and Mangoo Ram's *Ad-Dharma* movement never became a part of the nationalist struggle which emerged in colonial times. They remained as insignificant low-caste leaders in the eyes of nationalist elites.

At the same time, other social reformers found space in the nationalist struggle in modern India. Reasons for this precisely can be understood as social reform movements such as Arya Samaj, Jat Pat Todak Mandal, Brahmo Samaj, and Prarthana Samaj all revolved around reforms without challenging the base of caste structures. Since privileged caste social reformers initiated these reforms, the privileges of upper castes, which lie in the religious scriptures, remained untouched.

The problem of Caste and Conversion among Marginalized communities: Early Conversions resisting caste:

Along with social reforms and movements that attacked caste and discarded its sacred status in religious texts, the oppressed masses converted to other religions that preached equality (Jaffrelot, 2004). The studies on conversion in India predominantly investigate conversions in missionary religions, such as Christian missionaries, and some on Islamic conversion (Robinson, 2003;

Clarke, 2003; Louis, 2007; Deshpande & Bapna, 2008). Additionally, in recent years, Bauman (2008), Robinson and Kujur (2010), and others have examined the connection between caste and Christianity by examining how the conversion has altered the marginalization and subaltern identity of Dalits and tribals in India.

The protest through religious conversion among the *Mahar* community saw massive conversion in a single day; conversion as a protest had gotten little attention after Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism. Several marginalized communities in India have been drawn to Christianity due to its affiliation with a modern egalitarian value system that emerged among the lower class in the western world. As Louis Dumont (1980)⁸² has argued, while the principle of 'Homo Hierarchicus' marked Indian social structure and ideology, the Christian West was represented through the principle of 'homo equalis' that garnered support from the less valued society in India. It resulted in the Dalits and Tribes of India being the majority converts to Christianity for a long time.

Christian missionaries initially focused on dominant castes to convert them, but they later shifted to and worked actively to convert low caste to Christianity. Modern Christian missionaries have played a significant role in contrasting caste societies on the Indian subcontinent with those in the West. According to Peter van der Veer (1996),⁸³ the unique emphasis on rationality (reason) and freedom (free will) in the Indian context attracted marginalized communities. It contrasts with irrationality (lower status due to birth in a low caste) and immorality (discrimination based on caste) of the caste system. Therefore, the less valued masses believed Christianity was superior,

⁸² Quoted in Berger and Sahoo (eds), (2020:6). *Godroads: Modalities of Conversion in India*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press.

⁸³ Quoted in Berger and Sahoo (eds), (2020:9). *Godroads: Modalities of Conversion in India*, New Delhi: Cambridge University Press.

making them accept Christianity over the immoral beliefs of caste societies. Peter van der Veer theorized it as 'conversion to modernities'-finding something more valuable and dignified.⁸⁴ It put an end to speculation raised by secularization theory that predicted the incompatibility of religion in modern society.

Scholars have discussed this phenomenon of conversion to modernity through their empirical work. Sanal Mohan (2015)⁸⁵ argues that the slave castes suffered at the hands of both Hindus and European colonizers. Slave castes were sold and bought by the local landlords and colonial masters. However, the intervention of Christian missionary and their humanitarian work attracted the slave castes in Kerala. The conversion of slave castes to Christianity helped them to transform their self-identity. Sanal Mohan focused on the role of Protestant missionary Christianity, which significantly impacted the rise of Dalit consciousness and modernity in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Kerala. On another occasion, in his article 'Subaltern Counterpublics: Dalits and Missionary Christianity in Kerala,' Sanal Mohan (2019:97)⁸⁶ argues that Christian missionaries brought modernity to Slave castes through their intervention that created a new public sphere. In this new public space, slave castes gathered for the congregations where they learned new ideas represented in the Bible. It provided them with possibilities for the articulation of new ideas and perspectives of life that could lead them to good life which they had never experienced.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Berger and Sahoo (eds), (2020:9). *Godroads: Modalities of Conversion in India*, New Delhi: Cambridge University Press.

⁸⁵ P Sanal Mohan, (2015). *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

⁸⁶ Sanal Mohan, P. (2019). Subaltern Counterpublics: Dalits and Missionary Christianity in Kerala. *Nidan*, Volume 4, No.2, December 2019, pp. 97-118. doi.org/10.36886/nidan.2019.4.2.6

Sanal Mohan broadly referred to these new ideas as social imaginaries. The slave castes, with these new social imaginaries, started to organize their everyday life, and their congregational gatherings created a public space that played a significant role in the gradual spread of literacy. Literacy brought a change in reproducing the scriptures in their texts, and they began to read the scriptures. Such changes brought by missionaries helped the slave castes to create oppositional subaltern counterpublics in Kerala.

Forrester (2017:14-15)⁸⁷ discussed the *Paravar*-the fisherman community on the Fishery Coast, who had been exploited and oppressed throughout by both privileged castes as well as Muslims, sought protection from Portuguese colonial masters and, in return, formally converted to Christianity in Roman Catholicism. Forrester further argued that *Paravar* was the majority in numbers who got converted in large numbers. However, many other low castes, primarily individuals from marginalized social backgrounds, also got converted along with *Paravar*. Subsequently, the conversion to Christianity was reduced to either foreigner or polluting low castes in India (Forrester, 2017, p. 15).⁸⁸ Similarly, Rupa Viswanath (2013:121)⁸⁹ also asserted that the Pariah caste of Tamil Nadu also turned to Christianity to avoid caste-based exploitation and prejudice while studying the subject of Pariah conversion in colonial south India. In this instance as well, Christianity was degraded to a Pariah-only religion.

Likewise, Buddhism in Maharashtra has also been reduced to the religion of untouchable and low castes. Even though the upper caste agreed that Buddhism preaches egalitarianism and

⁸⁷ Forrester, Duncan B. (2017). *Caste and Christianity: Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions in India*. New York: Routledge.

⁸⁸ Forrester, Duncan B. (2017). *Caste and Christianity: Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions in India*. New York: Routledge.

⁸⁹ Viswanath, Rupa. (2013). The Emergence of Authenticity Talk and the Giving of Accounts: Conversion as Movement of the Soul in South India, ca 1900. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 55 (1), pp. 120-141.

equality for everyone, upper castes are unwilling to accept it formally. Therefore, it is evident from this that there are always possibilities of religion playing a significant role in bringing Modernity to pre-modern societies. It can also be said that the pre-modern value system can still be found in religious beliefs in modern times. Moreover, there are always possibilities of conversion to modern religions, which can be referred to as conversion to modernity.

Religious Conversion and Question of Caste Identity:

We saw how communities troubled by caste oppression were attracted to the missionary religions which advocated equality. Sociologists and anthropologists who worked on religious conversion in India have initially concentrated mainly on caste and identity issues among those communities and their life after conversion. The questions they addressed through their work revolved around the implications of religious change through conversion to the caste system and fixed hierarchy among the different castes post-conversion. They also addressed whether it transforms the identity-formation processes of new converts in a new religion that does not approve of caste as a system in their sacred text and central belief system. In this regard, the works of Chris Fuller (1976); Alexander (1998); Lobo (2001); Robinson (2010); and David Mosse (2012) have been very noteworthy.

While the religious scriptures of Christianity do not subscribe to caste, it was believed that conversion would eliminate the caste hierarchy (Mallampalli, 2004, p. 159).⁹⁰ Fuller (1976) and Alexander (1998) explored Christianity in Kerala and demonstrated how caste structures and traditions have persisted in dictating converts' day-to-day relationships and social interactions.

⁹⁰ Quoted in Berger and Sahoo (eds), (2020:4). *Godroads: Modalities of Conversion in India*, New Delhi, Cambridge University Press.

Even after becoming Christians, upper-caste converts continued to discriminate against converts who were once members of lower castes. In economic and social affairs, low-caste converts lag behind their high-caste counterparts.

Fuller (1976:61)⁹¹ further argued, "the various Protestant Churches in Kerala are regarded as low in status because almost all their members are converted Harijans." He also noted that as inter-caste marriages were strictly prohibited between different castes, high-caste and low-caste Christians also continued to have such restrictions. Fuller highlights the continuation of caste preferences in marital relations in Kerala among converted Christians, where he argues that "there are no marital unions between the Syrians and Latin Christians or Neo (New) Christians, nor are there unions between the latter two groupings. Such a marriage would be as unthinkable for a Syrian as would marriage to a Harijan be for a Nayar (Fuller, 1976, p.56–57)."⁹²

Tharamangalam (1996:270),⁹³ however, argues that scholars have mistaken different Christian sects as castes as there is a tendency for the sects in India to be absorbed into the caste system. Therefore, there should be a distinction in approach while understanding caste among Christians in India. He distinguishes sects among Christians based on their religious beliefs and doctrinal changes. He also held mass conversion movements where the entire caste joined a particular sect as a cluster of caste as the reason for sects being absorbed as castes in Christianity. Robinson (2010:13)⁹⁴ articulated the caste differences among different sects of Christians as 'caste-like' differences that are not integrated ideologically. She further argues that while spatial

⁹¹ Fuller, C.J. (1976). Kerala Christians and the Caste System, *Man*, 11(1), pp.53-70.

⁹² Fuller, C.J. (1976). Kerala Christians and the Caste System, *Man*, 11(1), pp.53-70.

⁹³ Tharamangalam, J. (1996:270). Caste Among Christians in India, pp. 263-291. In Srinivas, M.N. (ed), *Caste: Its Twentieth-Century Avatar*, Gurugram: Penguin Books.

⁹⁴ Robinson, Rowena. (2010). Christian Communities of India: A Social and Historical Overview, *Religions and Development, India*. Working Paper Series, Vol.1, No.1. pp. 1-29.

segregation based on caste within churches is no longer formally sanctioned anywhere, it often continues in muted and less explicit ways outside the Church, and caste continues to rear its head in social relations. It includes most Christian communities that tend to be caste endogamous.

Alexander (1998),⁹⁵ in his study on *Pulaya*, the ex-untouchable caste from Kerala converted to Christianity, has argued that ex-untouchables converted to Christianity are known as Neo-Christians, and they are distinguished from the Syrian Christians. On the contrary, converts from upper castes, even though they have been converted recently, are never called as neo-Christians. Due to their past status as an untouchable caste, Pulaya converts are always referred to as Neo-Christians. Their status in the Christian community remained as the low castes as it was before their conversion to Christianity. In a similar line, Lobo (2001)⁹⁶ discusses the dual identity of Dalits converted to Christianity. He gives an example of *Mahar* converting to Christianity in Maharashtra. They are referred to as *Christi Mahar* in Maharashtra and continue to identify with their caste.

Fuller, Robinson, and Alexander demonstrated that caste followed the converts into the new religion and continued to be identified along with their caste identities, such as *Pulaya* Christians in Kerala, Nadar Christians in Tamil Nadu, and Catholic *Reddy* in Andhra Pradesh. Christian caste tolerance has evolved over time, as demonstrated by Mosse (2012). According to Mosse, Christianity or its sacred texts never recognized the caste system, and caste practices were

⁹⁵ Alexander, K.C. (1998). The Neo Christians of Kerala. In Michael Mahar, J. (ed), *The Untouchables in Contemporary India*, Jaipur: Rawat Publication.

⁹⁶ Lobo, Lancy. (2001). Vision, Illusion, and Dilemmas of Dalit Christians in India. In Shah, Ghanshyam (ed). *Dalit Identity and Politics: Cultural Subordination and Dalit Challenges*, Vol. II. New Delhi: Sage Publication.

deemed "superstitious." However, it never separates from it. Jesuit missionaries tried to modernize and secularize caste so it would be "tolerated among converts" (Mosse, 2012, p. 8).⁹⁷

With this, Caste, which had previously been recognized for its religious significance, was now relegated to the status of a purely civil institution, and its place in the personal lives of individuals was no longer acknowledged. Therefore, one can interpret it as though caste was denied any validation and rank in religious affairs of the Church; caste was socially or politically permitted in individual and private spaces. Converts were able to retain their caste practices after caste was secularized, and as Catholicism became indigenous, caste continued to play an important role in determining social relationships.

Navayana Buddhism: Question of Caste and Sub-caste among new converts

The studies discussed in the previous sections dealt with missionary religion and the conversion into one of the dominant religions supported and promoted by ruling classes across the globe. These religions continued to generate support from strong democracies and religious nations. Missionaries are still getting support for their humanitarian work and missionary work of preaching religion in various countries, including India. However, when it comes to Buddhism, after the Maurya period, it almost got eradicated and vanished from India- its birthplace. Religio-political turmoil left Buddhism without any support from the ruling classes. As it was almost extinguished from India, it was also reflected in scholarly engagement with Buddhism in India as it garnered significantly less attention.

⁹⁷ Mosse, David. (2012). *The Saint in the Banyan Tree: Christianity and Caste Society in India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Historically, scholars have given attention to Buddhism after Ambedkar's conversion movement. Scholars have specifically emphasized and seriously addressed the lived experiences of new converts in their day-to-day life. Mainly, western scholars, Zelliott (1996), Omvedt (2003), Beltz (2005), and Jaffrelot (2004) highlighted this important religio-cultural revolution of modern times. These scholars have dealt with the Dalit conversion experiences and their significance, as most Buddhist converts belonged to marginalized communities. Some of the studies addressed changes in the lives of new converts. Questions have also been raised about the emancipatory nature of Buddhism. They have also highlighted the contribution of conversion to the new Buddhist community's socio-economic-political life. Studies have broadly focused on how Dalits have represented the issue of conversion; studies have also concentrated on the depiction of Buddhist religious conversion in Dalit literature. They have presented the understanding and meaning of conversion as understood by the converts.

Further scholarly interventions on Buddhist conversion in Maharashtra broadly investigated caste, and sub-caste issues among *Mahar* converts. Scholars like Uma Chakravarti (2004:186)⁹⁸ have made one of the critical observations in her paper *Is Buddhism the Answer to Brahmanical Patriarchy?* that Buddhism can be one answer to Brahmanical patriarchy. However, it should break the connection between caste and gender in practice. One sees freedom from oppression, as well as freedom from previous social and religious beliefs, through conversion. People took Conversion to Buddhism as a definite move to equality in an oppressive caste society. Chakravarti highlights the patriarchal nature of religious practices in Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka also has a diluted form of caste practices where patriarchy is prevalent in a

⁹⁸ Chakravarti, Uma. (2004). *Is Buddhism the Answer to Brahmanical Patriarchy?* Pp. 186-202. In In Jondhale, Surendra and Beltz, Johhanes (ed.), *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

different form. Scholars have noted that the revival of a new form of Sinhala Buddhism became the ideology of the Sinhala ruling class, and they enjoyed a higher status in Buddhist rituals. Although Buddhism is a religion that upholds equality, offers the advantages of liberty, and fosters brotherhood, Silva (2017: 1-13)⁹⁹ argues that, in practice, it has exhibited some hegemonic tendencies in Sri Lanka.

Talking about the connection between gender and caste in association with the prevalence of patriarchy, Timothy Fitzgerald (2004:272-73)¹⁰⁰ draws a similar conclusion about the Neo-Buddhists and the prevalence of caste patriarchy within converted Buddhists in Maharashtra. He argues that traditional Indian society is fundamentally ritualistic, and endogamy is a requirement of the ritualistic status of the caste in the hierarchy. However, new converts to Buddhism, even though Buddhists themselves deplore it, the sub-caste differences between *Mahar* have continued to follow them even after their conversion to Buddhism.

Timothy has observed that social relations, particularly marriages happen between members of the same castes. Even sub-caste endogamy is widespread, at least in certain areas such as Nagpur and Marathwada (2004:272).¹⁰¹ Therefore, unless these sub-caste differences are merged among the neo-Buddhists, they cannot significantly impact the caste system. Gokhale (1986:272-73)¹⁰² further contended that the Buddhist conversion strategy had little success in

⁹⁹ Silva, Kalinga Tudor. (2017). Buddhism, Social Justice, and Caste: Reflections on Buddhist Engagement with Caste in India and Sri Lanka. *Society and Culture in South Asia*, 3(2). Pp. 1-13.

¹⁰⁰ Fitzgerald, Timothy. (2004:272-73). Analyzing Sects, Minorities, and Social Movement in India: The Case of Ambedkar Buddhism and Dalit(s). In Jondhale, Surendra and Beltz, Johannes (ed.), *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press. pp. 267-282.

¹⁰¹ Fitzgerald, Timothy. (2004:272). Analyzing Sects, Minorities, and Social Movement in India: The Case of Ambedkar Buddhism and Dalit(s). In Jondhale, Surendra and Beltz, Johannes (ed.), *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press. pp. 267-282.

¹⁰² Gokhale, Jayashree. (1986). The Sociopolitical Effects of Ideological Change: The Buddhist Conversion of Maharashtrian Untouchables, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 2, (Feb. 1986), pp. 269-292.

India's post-Ambedkar Dalit movement. The concept of Bauddhamay Bharat, an inclusive counter-ideology that challenges India's caste-based system of social exclusion through Buddhist conversion, was unable to take root.

These critical observations of the scholars largely came soon after the conversion event, which took place just a few years back in 1956. Significantly less time has passed, and the community got very little time to unlearn the caste practices they had been following forcefully or even willfully for centuries. As change is a long process, it is unfair to judge the communities soon after their conversion based on their social practice. For long Buddhist discourse was dominated by *Mahar* converts, and very few non-*Mahar* castes had shown interest in conversion. It also significantly impacted the slow change progress on the socio-cultural front of the Buddhist conversion movement.

Gokhale (1986:272-73)¹⁰³ further argued that although Buddhist conversion has not achieved the desired outcome at the more significant level, at the individual level, and in specific terms of the *Mahar*-Buddhist community, this agenda has been presented as a noteworthy success. Gokhale (1986) further says that the collective impact of the mass conversion of *Mahar* to Buddhism turned out "opposite of what was intended," has given a distinct identity to *Mahar*-Buddhists and separates *Mahar*-Buddhists from other untouchable castes and caste-Hindus. Therefore, she says that conversion to Buddhism, though intended to bring communities together, resulted opposite to intended and has added a new Dalit community to the already existing long list of Dalit castes in India.

¹⁰³ Gokhale, Jayashree. (1986). The Sociopolitical Effects of Ideological Change: The Buddhist Conversion of Maharashtrian Untouchables, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 2, (Feb. 1986), pp. 269-292.

As rightly argued by Beltz (2004:259),¹⁰⁴ "caste is a much too complex social phenomenon to be abolished by a small minority fighting against the majority will." The minority of Buddhist converts alone cannot fight against social evil such as caste; it requires a more extensive community base. As the Buddhist conversion discourse was dominated by *Mahar* mass conversion movement for a long, it was natural that all the studies concerning Buddhist conversion could only get to see what the caste has achieved. However, in the recent past non-*Mahar* castes converted to Buddhism and have joined the movement in large numbers. Therefore, it is important to investigate such practices of caste and sub-caste relations among Buddhist conversion when half a century has passed since Ambedkar gave Buddhism to people in Maharashtra, and other non-*Mahar* communities have started to embrace Buddhism in the recent past.

Beltz (2005), in his book, *Mahar, Buddhist, and Dalit*, writes about the caste and sub-caste, where he emphasizes the sub-caste within *Mahar* and explains that *Mahars* were divided into various sub-caste. Nevertheless, nowadays, it does not play a vital role in matrimonial relations as it did before. He explains there had been many inter-sub-caste marriages between *Mahars*, and inter-caste marriage between *Mahar* Buddhist males and the *Maratha* female is common (Beltz, 2005, p. 93).¹⁰⁵

D.C. Ahir, one of the critical scholars, has noted the impact of Neo-Buddhism on the converts. Religion has helped the converts to shed their inferiority complex; he regards it as the utmost achievement of Neo-Buddhism. Ahir (1994:14)¹⁰⁶ argues, "In other words, the adoption of

¹⁰⁴ Beltz, Johannes. (2004:259). Contesting Caste, Hierarchy, and Hinduism: Buddhist Discursive Practices in Maharashtra. Pp. 245-266. In Jondhale, Surendra and Beltz, Johannes (ed.), *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

¹⁰⁵ Beltz, Johannes. (2005). *Mahar, Buddhist, and Dalit: Religious Conversion and Social-Political Emancipation in Contemporary Maharashtra*. New Delhi: Manohar.

¹⁰⁶ Ahir, D.C. (1994:14). *Dr. Ambedkar on Buddhism*, New Delhi: Dalit Upsurge.

Buddhism has brought about a revolution in the attitude of the followers of Dr. Ambedkar. They have liberated themselves from the stranglehold of the dominant caste. Moreover, elated by the new feeling of pride, identity, and cultural milieu, they no longer brook any indignity over their rights. Though economically weak, they are marching ahead with courage and confidence."

The emancipatory nature of religious conversion is noted by Webster (2002)¹⁰⁷ as well. He analyzes the religious strategies Dalits have employed to liberate themselves from religiously sanctioned deprivation and discrimination by caste Hindus and the changes it has undergone over a while. As per him, religion, conversion, identity, and liberation are interlinked and central to the Dalit emancipation movement. Moreover, from the Dalit convert's point of view, changing religion is a way of coping, resisting, and surviving oppression. Apart from all these, religion has offered Dalits a healing mechanism for the psychological consequences of oppression.

Conclusion and Relevance of this Study:

From the above review of literature, it may be stated that there are studies that highlighted the problem of Dalits regarding their poor socio-economic and political condition across the states, region, religion, and sects and their inability to resist the discrimination and domination of upper castes. Studies further focused on the conversion movement among Dalits as one of the strategies adopted by them for their emancipation. Many studies concerning conversion have dealt with the impact of the conversion on the Dalit status and compared them with Dalits from other religions and a non-Dalit population of the same community.

Studies concerning Buddhism have focused more on Ambedkar and his vision of Buddhist India. The focus was also on Buddhist ideology and religion among converted *Mahar*. However,

¹⁰⁷ Webster, John CB. (2002). *Religion and Dalit Liberation*. New Delhi: Manohar Publication.

as argued by Roberts (2016:4),¹⁰⁸ studies of religion focus on ritual contexts and textual practices. Very few studies tell us about people's everyday struggles. Roberts says the everydayness of religious life includes what they do when they are not 'doing' religion. For him, it is not just religion that gives meaning to everything we do, but he shows how what goes on in the street and the home gives meaning to religion too. It may be noted that the context of religion and religious conversion among non-*Mahar* Buddhist converts have been limitedly discussed and studied.

Brekke (2017:45) argues that "it is always problematic to use terms and concepts that have precise meanings in one historical context to describe the state of affairs in a very different setting."

¹⁰⁹ He says there is a difference in the use of concepts in different contexts, and it can only be understood by locating the differences in meanings in that context. Similarly, the conversion processes of people with different social backgrounds have different contexts. However, there have been studies that indicate differences between Neo-Buddhist experiences; no studies have highlighted the conversion processes of people from different social and cultural backgrounds (converted Buddhists from other Castes).

Ambedkar's epistemological approach to understanding caste references the *Bhakti* literature in which they talk about caste, varna, inequality, and discrimination. However, when he looked for a permanent solution, Ambedkar converted to Buddhism instead of the Bhakti Path or Phule's *Satyashodhak* Path, or even reforming Hinduism. Ambedkar's constant engagement with them is why a group as united and politicized as the *Mahar* opted for Buddhism. For a long time, Buddhism in Maharashtra remained a *Mahar*-dominated religion. Non-*Mahar* castes remained at

¹⁰⁸ Roberts, Nathaniel. (2016). *To be Cared for: The Power of Conversion and Foreignness of Belonging in an Indian Slum*. Oakland CA: University of California Press.

¹⁰⁹ Brekke, Torkel. (2017). *Religious Motivation and the Origins of Buddhism: A Social Psychological exploration of the Origins of a world religion*. New York: Routledge.

a distance from Buddhism. With the universal message of brotherhood and equality, Buddhism remained the untouchables' religion (Fuchs, 2004, p. 290).¹¹⁰ The reason for the same lies in the graded inequality among castes.

However, other non-*Mahar* castes in Maharashtra who stayed away from the Buddhist conversion movement started to join the movement. There are no studies about non-*Mahar* converts of Buddhism to reveal their experiences and the reasons for their rejection of the religion of their origin. Suryakant Waghmore (2013)¹¹¹ addressed socio-political churning among the *Matang* community in the Marathwada region, which asserted a similar Ambedkarite ideology to *Mahars* but was restricted to their political mobilization. Though he had mentioned the Buddhist conversion of the *Matang* community under Eknath Awad passively, his study has not focused on missionary and religious mobilization. He has also not focused on other social groups apart from Matangs in his study to reveal the processes involved in bringing other communities to the fold of Buddhism.

Therefore, this study focuses on the conversion experiences among non-*Mahar* communities such as *Matang* (*Mang*), *Charmakar* (*Chambhar*), *Valmiki* (*Mehetar*), *Mali*, *Lingayat*, *Bhavasara*, *Dhangar*, *Yellam*, *Gurav*, *Bhilla*, *Kaikadi*, and *Paradhi*, falls under constitutional categories of SC, ST, and OBC in Maharashtra. These plural narratives of recent converts need to be explored to understand the possibilities of shared ambitions in making a casteless society and how conversion to Buddhism is a significant step towards it. These plural

¹¹⁰ Fuchs, Martin. (2004). Buddhism and Dalitness: Dilemmas of Religious Emancipation. In Jondhale, Surendra and Beltz, Johannes (ed.), *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India* (283-300). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

¹¹¹ Waghmore, Suryakant. (2013). *Civility against Caste: Dalit Politics and Citizenship in Western India*. New Delhi: Sage.

narratives of how activist missionaries took Buddhism to non-*Mahar* communities make the conversion among non-*Mahar* communities a unique case.

Chapter Two

Debating Religion and Conversion: Contextualizing Buddhist Discourse in India

"The history of India before the Muslim invasion is the history of a moral conflict between Brahmanism and Buddhism."

(Ambedkar, 2014: 275)¹¹²

Introduction:

This chapter conceptualizes and theoretically locates religion and conversion in India. The theoretical underpinnings of religion as a concept and its applicability to Buddhism will be discussed in this chapter. While debating whether Buddhism can be called a religion, this chapter has brought in Dr. Ambedkar's view on religion. Further, it connected with Buddhism and drew on criticism faced by Buddhist discourse set by Dr. Ambedkar to debate whether Buddhism given by Dr. Ambedkar can be called authentic Buddhism as accepted by global Buddhists as a universal religion. He differentiates between *Dhamma* from *Dharma*. According to the Hindu understanding of the term *dharma*, it is equivalent to the western term 'religion.' If *Dhamma* differs from *dharma*, can we call Buddhism a religion? It has been elaborated further in this chapter bringing in scholarly arguments about what constitutes a religion and whether Buddhism qualifies those criteria to be a religion.

Similarly, like religion, conversion is also a western concept as it is a contribution of the missionary religion of Christianity to the discipline of religious studies. In standard Christian

¹¹² Ambedkar, B.R. (2014), *Revolution and Counter- Revolution in India*, In Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 3.

conception, conversion is defined as an act where an individual has little or no control over his or her religious transformation; whereas the conversion to early Buddhism is considered a self-realization of reasons for human suffering in life and breaking away from those reasons responsible for suffering in human life in the search for salvation (Brekke,2002:46).¹¹³ Those who joined Buddha as disciples and became Buddhist in the early period of Buddhism were already religious seekers and had broken all ties with life. Therefore, there was a debate on whether to call non-religious seekers who joined Buddhism as lay Buddhists an act of conversion. Further conversion has been seen as a disruptive act, and there was always opposition to missionary activities in India by calling it a foreign invasion. This chapter also covers this debate in brief.

Defining Religion: Whether to call Buddhism (Buddha's Dhamma) a Religion?

Considering the focus of the study is religious conversion, it is necessary to define what religion means. Let us consider the definition given in Oxford Learners Dictionary. The word religion means "one of the systems of faith that are based on the belief in the existence of a particular god or gods, or in the teachings of a spiritual leader (2003:1075)."¹¹⁴ This definition addresses two aspects of religion; first, God or divine forces are regarded as central to the religion. If religion means belief in God or Gods', then religions that do not have the concept of God or Gods will not qualify to be called religion. Buddhism does not have any such concept of God in its original philosophy. Therefore, the dictionary meaning of religion cannot explain why Buddhism should be called religion. However, Buddhism can certainly qualify to be called religion per the second part of this definition as it characterizes the belief or influence in/of the teachings of spiritual

¹¹³ Brekke, Torkel. (2002). *Religious Motivation and the Origins of Buddhism: A social-psychological exploration of the origins of a world religion*. New York: Routledge.

¹¹⁴ Weiner, Robert, and Murray. (2003:1075). *Oxford Learners Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

leaders, something significant in life. Followers of spiritual philosophy, like Buddhists, believe in Buddha's spiritual philosophy; therefore, it can be called religion.

The study is concerned explicitly with Buddhism adopted by Dr. Ambedkar and followed by non-*Mahar* communities in Maharashtra, which took up Buddhism in the wake of Dr. Ambedkar's conversion movement. Therefore, we must also understand Dr. Ambedkar's perspective on the term religion. As a result of its extensive evolutionary history, in Dr. Ambedkar's opinion, religion is an ambiguous concept with no clear definition. Dr. Ambedkar says, "religion is a human projection onto the cosmos of social values concerning life and its preservation embodied in the usages, practices, observances, rites, and rituals which are to shape the behavior of those who make up the society."¹¹⁵ In Dr. Ambedkar's view, religion emphasizes, universalizes, and spiritualizes social values. Individuals need to recognize and adhere to them in their behavior to function as accepted members of society. Therefore, Dr. Ambedkar deployed a functional approach to understanding religion.

In his use of the word 'religion,' Dr. Ambedkar employed two different meanings. When he asserted that Buddhism was not a religion, he echoed the definition of religion as it is found in the dictionary, which included a belief in God or divine forces as central. Buddha rejected belief in God and other supernatural beings, which is why Ambedkar did not consider Buddhism a religion per the popular understanding of the term. Early sociologists, including Emile Durkheim, who sought the relationship between religion and society, adopted a broader sense of religion and its role in bringing people together. Durkheim concentrated on religion's "sacred" component and

¹¹⁵ Quoted in Webster, John C. B. (2002:50). *Religion and Dalit Liberation: An Examination of Perspective*, New Delhi: Manohar Publication.

how it serves as a unifying force for interpersonal relationships. Durkheim (1995:44) defines religion as a "unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them."¹¹⁶ Durkheim's definition emphasizes the functionality of religious beliefs and practices. Therefore, what is considered sacred is a combination of the community's beliefs and actions. For Durkheim, "In every society, whether primitive or advanced, there are certain beliefs or things that are sacred and others that are profane."¹¹⁷ As the sacred gets its meaning in connection with forbidden acts, sacredness is maintained by protecting and prohibiting something sacred.

Dr. Ambedkar explained the 'sacred morality' that echoed Durkheim's idea of sacred and profane. Dr. Ambedkar argues that exploitation would continue in societies that do not adhere to a shared morality that prioritizes protecting individual rights. Dr. Ambedkar (1992:325) further concludes that in the absence of morality:

*"...there can be liberty for some but not for all. This means that there can be equality for a few but none for the majority. What is the remedy? The only remedy lies in making fraternity universally effective. What is fraternity? It is nothing but another name for the brotherhood of men, which is another name for morality. This is why the Buddha preached that Dhamma is morality and as Dhamma is sacred, so is morality."*¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Durkheim, Emile. (1995: 44). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York. The Free Press.

¹¹⁷ Ibid

¹¹⁸ Ambedkar, B.R. (1992). *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, In Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 11.

Morality is something that every religion teaches and upholds, yet it does not form the foundation of every religion. The world's religions have been stuck in a paradigm that requires them to center their beliefs on concepts such as God, rites and rituals, the soul, worship, prayers, sacrifices, and ceremonies. On the other hand, as Dr. Ambedkar (1992:322) situates his religion on the foundation of morality, he says, "in *Dhamma*, morality takes the place of God. It is sacred and holy; to transgress it is sacrilege."¹¹⁹ Therefore, though Buddhism does not have the concept of God or fear of the unknown, it qualifies to be called religion as morality replaces God in Buddhism, which regulates the relationship between man and man and not between God and Man. However, while analogous to what the European theologians call Religion, *Dhamma* is quite different. "Religion is personal; *Dhamma* is social. Religion seeks to explain the world in metaphysical and theological terms; *Dhamma* seeks to transform/ reconstruct the world."¹²⁰

As Durkheim says, everything considered sacred becomes part of the religion and its beliefs. Therefore, the question here is if Buddhism does not require any sacred practices, set of rituals, and beliefs as something mandatory to be observed, how do we see such religion in physical form? Whether we need those sacred practices and beliefs to prove the existence of any religion? Weber's idea of "prophecy" answers this confusion. For Weber, prophecy in any religion is one of the important aspects of understanding religion and the identity it can give to its followers. Weber divided prophecy into two different types, first '*exemplary prophecy*' and second '*emissary prophecy*' (Weber, 1948:285).¹²¹ Exemplary prophecy refers to the path to salvation by an ideal

¹¹⁹ Ambedkar, B.R. (1992). *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, In Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 11.

¹²⁰ Ambedkar, B. R. (1992:322). *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, In Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches. Vol. 11.

¹²¹ Weber, Max. (1948). *From Max Weber: Essay in Sociology*. Hans, H. and Wright Mills, C. (ed.) New York: Oxford University Press.

way of living, usually by a contemplative and apathetic ecstatic life. The exemplary prophet challenges the status quo by living an ideal life, with an example being the Buddha.

On the other hand, as per Emissary prophecy, the prophet is sent by God to share his message with lay people on how they should live (Weber, 1948:285).¹²² The emissary prophecy, therefore, believes that one possesses a truth from God that must be shared with others and even imposed on others to save them. Such religions need those sets of sacred practices and beliefs.

Dr. Ambedkar illustrated the difference between the exemplary and emissary prophecy well in "*Buddha and Future of his Religion*," as he explained the difference between *Mokshadatta* and *Margadatta*.¹²³ His self-abnegation differentiates Buddha from the rest of his counterparts of other religions. Ambedkar explains it with examples from Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. In the Bible, the sacred text of Christians, Jesus, the protagonist, insists that if they fail to recognize him as the Son of God, there will not be any scope for those to become part of the kingdom of God. In Islam, the Quran upholds Muhammad as the messenger of God. Jesus and Muhammad claimed to be God's messengers on earth, but Muhammad went one step further by insisting he was the final prophet. For Hindus, there are many legends and many avatars of Vishnu. One of Vishnu's avatars, Krishna, went beyond both Jesus and Muhammad. He not only claimed the status of God for himself, but he also asserted his divinity as "Parameshwar," or as his devotees refer to him, "Devadhideva," the God of Gods.¹²⁴

¹²² Weber, Max. (1948). *From Max Weber: Essay in Sociology*. Hans, H. and Wright Mills, C. (ed.) New York: Oxford University Press.

¹²³ Ambedkar, B.R. (2014: 97), *Buddha and Future of his Religion*, In Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part II.

¹²⁴ Ambedkar, B.R. (2014: 97), *Buddha and Future of his Religion*, In Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part II.

Buddha never claimed to himself any such status and served humankind through his preachings of the gospel as an ordinary man. He never claimed supernatural status for himself as the rest of them claimed. For Buddha, the difference between a *Margadata* and a *Mokshadata* was clear. After attaining enlightenment, the Buddha performed his part as a *Margadata*- someone who shows the way.¹²⁵ Therefore, Buddha's Dhamma has no place for God, soul, miracles, or supernatural powers and is not a divine or supernaturally given religion. It is a religion of humans and has its roots in human co-existence.

Durkheim also established that religion is a product of society and is not divinely or supernaturally inspired. In his studies, he tried to identify what religion stressed and how those beliefs (products of a society's interactions) impacted society's lives.¹²⁶ Durkheim described the sociality of religion in *The Elementary Forms*:

"The general conclusion of the book that the reader has before him is that religion is eminently social. Religious representations express collective realities; the rites are actions that take rise amid assembled groups and are destined to excite, maintain, or recreate certain mental states in these groups. So, if the categories are of religious origin, they should participate in this nature common to all religious facts; they should be social affairs and the product of collective thought. At least- for in the actual condition of our knowledge of these

¹²⁵ Ambedkar, B.R. (2014: 97), *Buddha and Future of his Religion*, In Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part II.

¹²⁶ See Thompson, (1982:125). *Emiel Durkheim*. London: Tavistock Publication.

*matters, one should be careful to avoid all radical and exclusive statements- it is allowable to suppose that they are rich in social elements."*¹²⁷

In addition, religion is defined further in terms of beliefs and rites. According to Durkheim, religious beliefs are ideas, concepts, values, and states of opinion on religious practices, and religious rites are modes of action in the religious realm (Durkheim, 1995). He says religious rites are related to the idea of the Sacred, "rites are rules of conduct that prescribe how man must conduct himself with sacred things (Durkheim, 1995:38)."¹²⁸ The Sacred can be understood as something that is protected and isolated by taboos. He further defined the thing to which such taboos are applied and that must keep at a distance. Further, he says that the Sacred is different from the divine. As per him, not only gods and spirits can be sacred, but also things like rocks, trees, and pieces of wood can be sacred. That means anything considered sacred in a particular religious belief is part of that religion and gives religious identity to devote to that sacred. Therefore, religion provides meaning for life, it provides authority figures, and, most notably, for Durkheim, it reinforces the morals and social norms held collectively by all within a society. Durkheim viewed religion as an integral part of the social system as it provides people purpose and controls social behaviors by approving norms for cohesion.

Considering the social function of the religion that gives purpose and hope and also disciplines the social behavior of individuals living in society, Aloysius (2015:126) argues that there was never any ambiguity about the function of Buddha's Dhamma as religion in controlling social behavior.¹²⁹ Aloysius relies upon P Laxmi Narasu to distinguish religion and dharma.

¹²⁷ Thompson, (1982:125). *Emiel Durkheim*. London: Tavistock Publication.

¹²⁸ Durkheim, Emile. (1995:38). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: The Free Press.

¹²⁹ Aloysius, G. (2015). *Iyothee Thassar and Tamil Buddhism Movement: Religion as Emancipatory Identity*, New Delhi, Critical Quest.

According to him, Buddhism is unquestionably a religion if, by that term, we mean something that fosters zeal and fervor and instills discipline in followers' lives. Nearly 500 million people worldwide now experience spiritual fervor and delight thanks to it, and it has helped humanity overcome evil and suffering on a physical level.¹³⁰ Buddhism, therefore, constituted religion.

Religion and Modernity: Dr. Ambedkar on Buddhism, its function, and necessity in modern times

Ambedkar always upheld the necessity of religion for society, which was necessary to back up a moral code. Dr. Ambedkar (2016) refers to Prof. Ellwood to specify the function of religion. In his view, religion serves as a mechanism by which people are controlled, that is, by the community regulating the lives of individuals for the benefit of the whole group.¹³¹ Ambedkar quoted him again as he addressed the same question in another place. Prof. Ellwood¹³² says, "the function of religion is the same as that of Law and Government. It means religion is an institution by which society exercises control over the individual's conduct to maintain the social order. It may not be used consciously as a method of social control over the individual. Nonetheless, the fact is that religion act as a means of social control."

While highlighting psychological aspects of social control, Prof Ellwood argued,

"As compared to religion, Government and Law are relatively inadequate means of social control. The control through law and order does not go deep enough to

¹³⁰ Aloysius, G. (2015). *Iyothee Thassar and Tamil Buddhism Movement: Religion as Emancipatory Identity*, New Delhi: Critical Quest.

¹³¹ See Ellwood, *The Religious Reconstruction*, pp. 42-42, Quoted in Ambedkar, B.R. (2016: 410-11), Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 5.

¹³² See Ellwood: 1913, *Society in its Psychological aspects*, pp. 356-57, Quoted in Ambedkar, B.R. (2016: 410-11), Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 5.

*secure the stability of the social order. Because it is supernatural, religious sanction has been the most effective means of social control, far more effective than law and Government have been or can be. Without the support of religion, law and Government are bound to remain a very inadequate means of social control. Religion is the most powerful force of social gravitation without which it would be impossible to hold the social order in its orbit."*¹³³

From the above discussion, it is clear that individuals are also governed by their religious faith and teachings apart from Law and Government. State-through-law mechanisms have a limitation in social control. For instance, discrimination based on caste is banned as per law. However, social relations are still determined based on caste in India. Hindus give importance to caste order and follow it undeterred. On many occasions, we have seen that they have gone beyond the constitutional rule of the land and inflicted violence on those who dared to flaunt the sacred caste boundaries. Similarly, though dowry is prohibited as per law, it continued to be practiced openly, and many times women and girls have been tortured by their families for dowry.

While highlighting the supreme authority of religion in social relations, Ambedkar (2020:503) argued that

"Law is secular, which anybody may break, while fraternity or religion is sacred, which everybody must respect. My philosophy has a mission. I have to do the work of conversion; for I have to make the followers of Triguna theory give it up and accept mine. Indians today are governed by two different ideologies. Their

¹³³ See Ellwood: 1913, Society in its Psychological aspects, pp. 356-57, Quoted in Ambedkar, B.R. (2016: 410-11), Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 5.

*political ideal, set out in the Preamble to the Constitution, affirms a life of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Their social ideal embodied in their religion denies them [these]."*¹³⁴

Therefore, since religion has better penetration in society in maintaining social control, the set of rules, principles, and beliefs it contains, it must have a sense of public spirit. Religion should be human in its practice; otherwise, it can be oppressive, and people following the religion may suffer oppression and exploitation, resulting in inequality. Sociologists sensed this fear that if the religion one believes in propagates oppressive beliefs, it will lead to disasters for many. Therefore, they see minimal scope for religion in modern societies. Scholars understand modernity as secular in the sense of being non-religious. They believe that in the process of secularism, religion would lose its importance in the modern world and deprive of its importance in social life (Omvedt, 2003, p. 18).¹³⁵ According to the "secularization theory of modernity,"¹³⁶ religion and modernity are incompatible, and as society becomes modern, religion will become less popular. Ambedkar argues,

"Almost all political theorists in the western tradition have accepted some justification for separating religion from the State. Secularization is seen as part of a process of modernization embracing the protestant reformation, the rise of the modern state, the growth of capitalism, and the expansion of the sciences. All these dynamics cause religion to loosen its dominating influence in political life. However, we know that each of these carriers of modernization develops in

¹³⁴ Ambedkar, B.R. (2020:503), *My Philosophy of Life*, In Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17. Part III. Dr Ambedkar's speech delivered at Delhi Aakashvani on 3rd October 1954.

¹³⁵ Omvedt, Gail. (2003). *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste*. New Delhi: Sage.

¹³⁶ Berger, P.L. (2012). Further Thoughts on Religion and Modernity. *Soc* 49, 313–316.

different places at different times, and the historical processes of secularization thus vary accordingly."¹³⁷

The secularization theory predicted the incompatibility of religion in modern society. However, Peter van der Veer (1996)¹³⁸ argues that in the Indian context, "the authoritarian irrationality of priests in Hinduism leads to people turning to missionaries and getting converted. They were attracted to its unique emphasis on rationality (reason) and free will (free will)." Therefore, finding something more valuable and dignified attracts the less-valued masses. As in the case of colonial rulers who brought western modernity with them, believed Christianity was superior to Hinduism. Marginalized castes, which make up the majority of Christian converts in India, accepted Christianity over the immoral beliefs of Hindus. Peter van der Veer theorizes it as a "conversion to modernities."¹³⁹ It has been established convincingly by anthropologists that religion and modernity coexist in contemporary societies (Hefner 1998; Joas 2009)¹⁴⁰ and also demonstrated how conversion is often motivated by the desires and dreams of modernity (Berger, 2012).¹⁴¹ Ambedkar's argument goes with the belief that,

"Every man should have a philosophy of life, for everyone must have a standard by which to measure his conduct. And philosophy is nothing but a standard by which to measure. Negatively, I reject the Hindu social philosophy propounded

¹³⁷ Verma, Vidhu. (2010: 58-59). Reinterpreting Buddhism: Ambedkar on Politics of Social Action. *Economic and Political Weekly*. December 4-10, 2010. Vol. 45, No. 49. Pp 56-65.

¹³⁸ Quoted in Berger, Peter and Sahoo, Sarbeswar. (eds), (2020). *Godroads: Modalities of Conversion in India*, New Delhi: Cambridge University Press.

¹³⁹ Quoted in Berger, Peter and Sahoo, Sarbeswar. (eds), (2020). *Godroads: Modalities of Conversion in India*, New Delhi: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁴⁰ Quoted in Berger, Peter and Sahoo, Sarbeswar (eds), (2020). *Godroads: Modalities of Conversion in India*, New Delhi: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁴¹ Berger, P.L. (2012). Further Thoughts on Religion and Modernity. *Soc.* 49, 313–316.

in the Bhagavad Gita based as it is on the Triguna of the Sankhya philosophy, which is, in my judgment a cruel perversion of the philosophy of Kapila, and which had made the caste system and the system of graded inequality the law of Hindu social life."¹⁴²

Here, Ambedkar is pushing to reject something that does not fit modern society. At the same time, he proposes for alternative philosophy through which one can measure their conduct. Ambedkar recognized the crisis of his time; despite constitutional protections, individual belief systems regarding caste practices in India's social arena had not changed. Despite modernization, institutional religions significantly impact daily life. Ambedkar's philosophy of action responds to the dehumanizing caste practices; he strives to discover the framework within which individuals can actualize freedom as a mode of thought in action and regain a sense of individual salvation.

In Dr. Ambedkar's view, religion must be put to the social test, whether it is own or others. One must comprehend the societal ideals that it promises. Does it respect the inherent value of every individual as a human being, stand for equality, provide the benefits of liberty, and foster brotherhood? These questions must be posed not only about religious doctrines and belief systems but also about religious groups' customs, usages, observances, rituals, and daily life. After all, as Webster (2002, p. 52) argued, "it is not just the highest ideals but the actual living practice of religion that is important."¹⁴³

¹⁴² Ambedkar, B.R. (2020:503), *My Philosophy of Life*, Writing and Speeches, Vol. 17. Part III. Dr Ambedkar's speech delivered at Delhi Aakashvani on 3rd October 1954.

¹⁴³ Webster, John C.B. (2002). *Religion and Dalit Liberation: An Examination of Perspective*, New Delhi, Manohar Publication.

It was believed that Buddhism would give an alternative framework and new ideology to marginalized communities, and with this, they could contest the caste. Ambedkar himself believed in the liberatory aspects of Buddhism as an alternative to the caste-ridden Hindu religion. Leonard (2017)¹⁴⁴ discussed in his doctoral thesis “Iyothee Thassar and the Tamil Buddhist movement” Buddhism as an emancipatory movement with a religious articulation as its political and cultural content. He refers to Aloysius (2015),¹⁴⁵ who argued that the Buddhist movement was an emergence of the marginalized communities that were religiously excluded. As it believes in an equal social order, the religion of the downtrodden is, therefore, "an ethically ideal worldview." Second, Buddhism is a "choice" that never existed for those who willfully rejected the ascriptive religion to choose.

Furthermore, thirdly, there is an "emphasis on sociality and collectivity." The religion of the oppressed places emphasis on festivity. It establishes "an alternative hegemony" in the cultural and symbolic spheres. Buddhism provides its adherents with an "emancipatory identity" in the end.

Dr. Ambedkar found his social philosophy, which he believed to be enshrined in three words: liberty, equality, and fraternity. He said that he had not borrowed his philosophy from the French revolution but had roots in Buddhist philosophy. He has derived them from the teachings of his Master, the Buddha. Therefore, Ambedkar found this philosophy in Buddha's religion as it stands for fraternity, liberty, and equality. Ambedkar (1987: 462) believed:

¹⁴⁴ Leonard, Dickens. (2017). Un-published PhD thesis titled, ‘*Casteless Community: Iyothee Thass (1845-1914) and Tamil Buddhism*’, thesis submitted to Centre for Comparative Literature, University of Hyderabad.

¹⁴⁵ Aloysius, G. (2015). *Iyothee Thassar and Tamil Buddhism Movement: Religion as Emancipatory Identity*, New Delhi: Critical Quest.

*"Society has been aiming to lay a new foundation, as was summarized by the French Revolution in three words, fraternity, liberty, and equality. The French Revolution...failed to produce equality. We welcome the Russian Revolution because it aims to produce equality. But it cannot be too much emphasized that in producing equality, society cannot afford to sacrifice fraternity or liberty. It seems that these three can coexist only if one follows the way of the Buddha."*¹⁴⁶

Though he became familiar with Buddhism at an early age, Ambedkar did not go directly to Buddhism for his conversion. Ambedkar thought about it as true religion after thoroughly going through major religions and understanding the problem of inequality in religion. On his way to Buddhism, he studied all the contemporary religions in India. Ambedkar narrowed down his search for true religion and considered Buddhism and Marxism as options. After many years of deliberation, he selected Buddhism because of its egalitarian values and advocacy for women's rights. Buddhism was also a consideration for Ambedkar because it is an indigenous religion that rejects God and the soul.¹⁴⁷

While Ambedkar chose Buddhism as the religious tradition, at the same time, he reinterpreted and re-presented it in a form that he believed would serve his people's needs (Webster, 2002:53).¹⁴⁸ Ambedkar (2014:97) discussed the perspective of true religion and according to him, true religion consists of four characteristics: "First, it must remain the governing principle in every society in the sense of morality; second, it must be aligned with reason, which

¹⁴⁶ Quoted in Omvedt, Gail. (2003: 257). *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste*. New Delhi: Sage.

¹⁴⁷ Huynh, Trung (2013: 265). Why Did Ambedkar Choose Buddhism to Liberate His depressed Classes? In Mun, Chanju and Green, Roland S (eds), *Living in Peace: Insights from Buddhism*.

¹⁴⁸ Webster, John C. B. (2002:41). *Religion and Dalit Liberation: An Examination of Perspective*, New Delhi: Manohar Publication.

is just another name for science; third, it's moral code must recognize the fundamental tenets of liberty, equality, and fraternity; and fourth, it must not sanctify or ennoble poverty.”¹⁴⁹

Ambedkar's Buddhism: Examining the acceptability of Navayana Buddhism

Ambedkar used the criteria he had fashioned to judge the soundness of religion to reinterpret Buddhism for people's benefit. Neo-Buddhists are not branded but assert their distinction from other Buddhist sects, such as Hinayana or Mahayana. Ambedkar reinterpreted the teachings and principles of Buddhism, aligning them with the original teachings of Buddha. The version of Buddhism Dr. Ambedkar has developed is called Navayana Buddhism. However, Navayana Buddhism, having taken a different approach and being new, did not abandon the basic principles of Buddhism.

Navayana Buddhism has its methodology to preach Buddhism's teachings to people willing to learn it. There is no compulsion to follow Buddhism unless an individual is convinced about it without external manipulation. Unlike other major religions, Buddhism has no authority of scriptures to dictate rules to its followers. It aims to correct the wrong views and finally help an individual to change their mind to change society (Omvedt, 2003, p. 257).¹⁵⁰

The Buddhist world did not receive Navayana Buddhism given by Dr. Ambedkar to his followers without question. It was criticized as a theory of liberation for the sect of people in a specific context and region. It was also reduced to 'Ambedkar's Buddhism' and not 'Buddha's Dhamma.' Therefore, questions were raised about Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism and

¹⁴⁹ Ambedkar, B.R. (2014: 97). *Buddha and Future of his Religion*, Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part II.

¹⁵⁰ Omvedt, Gail. (2003: 257). *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste*. New Delhi: Sage.

whether it was a conversion to an original form of Buddhism.¹⁵¹ It has always remained one of the strongest criticisms against Navayana Buddhism. It challenges the universal appeal of Buddha's teaching and its applicability to every interested individual. Dalai Lama and his accusation against Ambedkarites and their conversion to Buddhism called it an act of rejection and hate for something rather than the desire for the positive side of Buddhism. He differentiated the Buddhist conversion of Ambedkar and the Deeksha administered by Ambedkar to his followers, creating thousands of Buddhist followers. Therefore, challenging the authenticity of Buddhism followed by Ambedkarite Buddhists of Maharashtra. In an interview, Dalai Lama says:

"The late Dr. Ambedkar was a scholar, lawyer, and freedom fighter. This shows that he was a serious person who was committed and determined. So, I feel that there were some valid reasons behind his conversion. He saw the benefit of taking on Buddhism at the individual level and the community level. . . . But he did not convert necessarily against another (religion) but rather to gain full rights for the individual or community. . . . Today, among the followers, some people do not seem to have the same proper foundation for converting. They do not see the positive side of Buddhism, but rather only their dissatisfaction with caste. These people are motivated by their feelings against the other religion (Hinduism). That is a little bit unhealthy. . . . They forget about the value of Buddhism and simply criticize the Hindus and the traditional religious Brahmin priests. That is not good. . . . I remember going to a small function in UP, about one hour's drive from Delhi. At the meeting, some neo-Buddhists started some

¹⁵¹ Fiske, Adele M (1969: 123). Religion and Buddhism among India's new Buddhists. *Social Research*, Spring 1969, Vol. 36, No.1, pp. 123-157.

very serious criticism against brahmins. The audience resented it, and a very tense atmosphere was created. After that, I decided that I would not go to that kind of meeting again."¹⁵²

Nevertheless, Christopher Queen (1994:99-122) has pointed out that Dr. Ambedkar's Buddhism is distinct from previous views of Buddhism since he saw the four noble truths as the erroneous addition of decadent monks and suffering as the outcome of societal injustice and poverty rather than mental attachments. Queen also points out that Dr. Ambedkar has offered fresh reading for Dhamma for his time using "reasonableness, social benefit, and subjective certainty of the Buddha Dhamma that was intelligible and relevant to India's Dalits as his master hermeneutic principle."¹⁵³ It resulted in a brilliant restatement of the central tenets of ancient Buddhism in keeping with the hermeneutic transformation within Buddhism itself.

Ahir (1998:135)¹⁵⁴ also take a similar position, saying that Dr. Ambedkar's last work, the Buddha and his Dhamma is thoroughly Buddhist in terms of the resources and literature on which it is based and its presentation of both the life and the teaching of the Buddha. Whatever key departures Ambedkar had from traditional interpretations of Buddhist texts are, by and large, following Buddha's original teachings. Dr. Ambedkar has added something of his own; it is only for presenting Dhamma from the proper perspective. Along similar lines, Gail Omvedt (2003:2)¹⁵⁵ argued that the Buddhist revival under the leadership of Ambedkar in the 20th century was not a mere revival or just returning to the history of Buddhism. According to Gail, Dr. Ambedkar's view

¹⁵² Quoted in Beltz, Johannes. (2005:206). *Mahar, Buddhist, and Dalit: Religious Conversion and Socio-Political Emancipation*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors.

¹⁵³ Queen, Christopher. S. (1994). *Ambedkar, Modernity, and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation*, In *Dr. Ambedkar's Buddhism and Social Change*. Narain, A.K. and Ahir, D.C. (eds.). Delhi. B.R. Publishing Corporation.

¹⁵⁴ Ahir, D.C. (1998). *Dr. Ambedkar's Vision of Dhamma: An Assessment*. Delhi: B.R. Publishing.

¹⁵⁵ Omvedt, Gail. (2003:2). *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste*. New Delhi: Sage.

of Buddhism was innovative. It questioned not only Brahmanical Hinduism but also prevailing Buddhist views. He was challenging what is not just and not adherent to principles of justice and equality, the fundamental teaching of Buddha, which he practiced and preached to his disciples throughout his life.

Beltz (2006:4) argues that though Buddhism refers to a universal ideal, it also refers to regional and local identities. In the Indian context, Buddhism means an ideal society without caste, a society that follows rationalist ideas and morality. Therefore, Buddhist identity should be held high above all referential. Referential such as Dalits Buddhist or Ambedkarite Buddhists do not stand for sectarian forms of Buddhism. It stands unique to other Buddhist beliefs, but it is part of the Buddhist whole and should be considered as Buddhists with full rights. One could conclude that Buddhism (Buddha Dhamma) cannot be described in a single way. Being a reasonably fluid idea, it combines various meanings: “the Buddha's teachings, particular ethics, a secularized moral order, individual religious practices, social equality, universal fraternity, and democracy.”¹⁵⁶

Different Meanings of the term Conversion and defining Religious Conversion:

Term conversion has a western origin, and the word comes from Latin, which means alteration or change. The standard conception of the word conversion has religious connotations. It was first used in Christianity to say that an external agent brings about that conversion and that the individual receives it passively and has little or no control over his or her religious transformation (Brekke, 2002, p. 46).¹⁵⁷ As per the Oxford English Dictionary, religious conversion means "the

¹⁵⁶ Beltz, Johannes. (2006). Dalit Buddhism: Re-evaluating the category. *Dalit- International News Letter*, February 2006, pp. 1-9.

¹⁵⁷ Brekke, Torkel. (2002). *Religious Motivation and the Origins of Buddhism: A social-psychological exploration of the origins of a world religion*. New York, Routledge.

fact of changing one's religion or beliefs or the action of persuading someone else to change theirs."¹⁵⁸

The word conversion, an action-oriented word, has two implications, first is that of agency or choice that determines the individual's decision to convert from one religion or belief, in which an individual is born into another religion or belief system. The second is that it may be an action brought upon by an external human agency driving the individual to convert from the religion or religious beliefs in which he/she is born to the other. One may then say that the common understanding of conversion, reflected in the definition given by the Oxford English Dictionary, is that it may be both, be determined by individual choice or by force, the first often seen in a positive light. In contrast, the second is primarily considered an act that undermines the agency of the convert.

Gauri Viswanathan (1998)¹⁵⁹ explained conversion in simple terms as changing religion. She characterizes conversion as an act of assimilation and dissent. Conversion brings people from one faith to another. It assimilates people from different social groups and motivates them to follow one faith or belief. On the other hand, dissent is disagreement, rejecting faith, and leaving it for other faith. It is a refusal to accept pre-existing orders and doctrine. Berger and Sahoo (2020)¹⁶⁰ have presented conversion as an ongoing process, not a singular transformational event. It is an outcome of the movement in action.

¹⁵⁸ Weiner, Robert, and Murray. (2003:1884). *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁵⁹ Viswanathan, Gauri. (1998). *Outside the fold: Conversion, Modernity and Belief*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

¹⁶⁰ Berger, Peter and Sahoo, Sarbeswar. (2020). *Godroads: Modalities of conversion in India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rebecca (2003:171) argues that "conversion involves not just adopting a set of ideas but also converting to and from an embodied worldview and identity."¹⁶¹ For her, conversion involves movement in various directions. The converts consciously select and embrace religions that suit their needs, and the assessment of needs by the converts develops within a specific historical context. It can vary and may not convey the same meaning for everyone. Therefore, it is essential to look at the different experiences of conversion of people from different socio-cultural backgrounds while looking at the non-*Mahar* conversion movement in Maharashtra.

The converts also reject, adopt, interpret, and sometimes invent the set of symbols and practices of the religion they convert. Rebecca (2003) argues,

*"Given that cultural beliefs and practices shape experience and that the meaning of religious language and ritual is grounded in embodied experience, converts initially understand their adopted religion through their worldview shaped over time. This applies not only to ideas but also to gesture, posture, and ritual, which involve deeply ingrained associations and learned relationships between bodily practice and inner states of consciousness."*¹⁶²

Therefore, the term conversion in this thesis refers to voluntarily giving up on the religion or set of beliefs in which they were born and brought up and adopting a new set of ideas and beliefs of the particular religion for personal as well as communitarian wellbeing.

¹⁶¹ Rebecca, Sachs Norris (2003:171). *Converting to What? Embodied Culture and the Adoption of New Beliefs*, in Buckser, Andrew and Glazier, Stephan (eds) *Anthropology of Religious Conversion*. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

¹⁶² Rebecca, Sachs Norris (2003:171). *Converting to What? Embodied Culture and the Adoption of New Beliefs*, in Buckser, Andrew and Glazier, Stephan (eds) *Anthropology of Religious Conversion*. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

Religious Conversion and Conflict of ideologies of missionary and non-missionary religions in India

Religious conversion has always remained at a conflicting juncture from the beginning. Specifically, religious conversion among marginalized communities has been problematized and questioned its genuineness. Such conversions are constantly accused of conversion without a spiritual base or merely an act of allurement. Discussions of conversion in India popularly referred to and always focused on Christianity.¹⁶³ It is often described as a transition from one religion to another. It has also been imagined as the transition from polytheistic Hindu or animist faith to Christianity- the British colonizer's monotheistic and superior faith.¹⁶⁴

No occasion had any Prime Minister of India held a face-to-face meeting with people who converted to other religions except in the mass conversion event in 1981 at Meenakshipuram, a small village in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. What happened in Meenakshipuram was that 181 families from marginalized communities identified as Scheduled Caste converted to Islam since they persistently were subject to violence from oppressor castes, also called upper castes. There was also a state apathy to render justice to caste atrocity victims. It was not the first time people in India protested the caste atrocities and injustice meted out to them through religious conversion.

However, few conversions happened in post-independent India, where more than 100 families left Hinduism to join Islam. Here the problem was about the conversion to Islam, a religion having foreign origin. Islam and Christianity are described as "foreign" religions, and conversion

¹⁶³ Wilkinson, Matthew (2020). *Melbourne Asia Review*, Edition 4, November 2020. Book Review- *Godroads: Modalities of conversion in India*. Editors-P. Berger and S. Sahoo.

¹⁶⁴ Berger, Peter and Sahoo, Sarbeswar. (2020) *Godroads: Modalities of conversion in India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

to these religions is treated as a matter of vital national concern (Roberts, 2016:111).¹⁶⁵ Precisely the reason why the Prime Minister herself met the people in person since she treated this event of conversion of people coming from marginalized communities to Islam at Meenakshipuram as a matter of national concern.

Contrary to this, the number of religious conversions in India, where people belonging to marginalized communities converted to Buddhism and Sikhism, never gained much attention. Those were never considered issues of national concern, and not much attention was paid to those conversions. Nevertheless, these conversions were ridiculed and criticized since Buddhism and Sikhism were treated as sects of Hinduism. The main reason behind this ignorance is that these are the religions originating in the Indian subcontinent. There was also an attempt to co-opt and appropriate these religions as part of Hinduism. Buddhism and Sikhism are appropriated by Hinduism as one of the many sects of Hinduism and declare the founders of these religions as different avatars of Hindu Gods.

Nevertheless, religious conversion has never got acceptance in India. Hindu religion is called a non-missionary religion since there is no option of becoming part of it through conversion. Therefore, the religious conversions to other missionary religions, such as Islam and Christianity in the Indian context, are termed violent acts and have been accused of disturbing the social fabric and age-old traditions and culture in local communities. Conversion has also been described as a conflict between local and foreign religions. These arguments defend Hinduism as a peaceful, non-missionary religion that never disrupts the socio-cultural fabrics of other religious faiths.

¹⁶⁵ Roberts, Nathaniel. (2016: 111). *To Be Cared for: The Power of Conversion and Foreignness of Belonging in an Indian Slum*. New Delhi: Navayana.

Similarly, Sahoo (2020:222)¹⁶⁶ discusses caste-tribe relations and conversion politics in Odisha. He argues that upper-caste nationalist forces believed conversion would threaten their concept of a nation. Hindus were believed to become a minority in their country if they converted from Hinduism to Christianity or Islam. They further problematize the religious conversion of tribals by accusing the Christian missionaries of using material inducements to lure the 'poor tribals' to convert them to Christianity, which violates the constitutional right to freedom to choose and profess any religion of their choice. Some arguments further politicize the tribal Christians and their right to access reservation policy. They argue that Christian tribals are taking undue advantage of the reservation policies and depriving the 'Hindu tribals' of availing of the benefits of affirmative action programs. While doing so, they appropriate tribals as part of Hinduism. This, however, does not end here. The governments have intervened and made some legislative provisions controlling the “forceful” conversions.¹⁶⁷ Scholarly interventions suggest that these laws are popularly known as anti-conversion legislation.¹⁶⁸

Possibility of Religious Reforms and Dr. Ambedkar's Decision of Conversion to Buddhism

Dr. Ambedkar first preferred reforms within Hinduism and religious conversion was never his first choice. He tried his best to gain equal rights by remaining in the Hindu religion. His first satyagraha was reformatory in nature. Be it the Mahad Satyagraha or the Kalaram temple entry Satyagraha; it

¹⁶⁶ Sahoo, Sarbeswar. (2020). Reservation and Religious Freedom: Understanding Conversion and Hindi-Christian Conflict in Odisha and Rajasthan, in Berger, Peter, and Sahoo, Sarbeswar. (eds). *Godroads: Modalities of conversion in India*. Cambridge University Press.

¹⁶⁷ There are many laws passed by different state governments in different point of time. For example, the Orissa Freedom of Religion Act which came into exist in 1967; the Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act in 1968; the Chhattisgarh Freedom of Religion Act in 1968; the Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act in 1978; and, the Gujarat Freedom of Religion Act 2003, etc. a recent example of such laws.

¹⁶⁸ Roberts, Nathaniel. (2016:114). *To Be Cared For: The Power of Conversion and Foreignness of Belonging in an Indian Slum*. New Delhi, Navayana.

highlighted disparities in Hinduism in the treatment meted out with untouchable castes. They were denied human rights. When all the attempts went futile in reforming Hindus, Dr. Ambedkar expressed his frustration and intended to convert for a better future. He says, "to remain in Hinduism and to attempt to abolish the caste system is like sweetening poison."¹⁶⁹ So Dr. Ambedkar's stand on the change of religion was very clear; for him, there was no chance of internal reform within Hinduism.

In 1927, in a public meeting held at Mahad- a town in the Konkan region of Maharashtra, Dr. Ambedkar first declared his discomfort with Hinduism. He said, "we want equal rights in society. We will achieve them as far as possible while remaining within the Hindu fold or, if necessary, by kicking away this worthless Hindu identity. And if it becomes necessary to give up Hinduism, it would no longer be necessary for us to bother about temples (Cited in Gore, 1993, p. 91)."¹⁷⁰ One must also see this as a warning to caste society for their slumber towards rampant discrimination against untouchable castes. After his announcement, it took more than twenty-nine years for Dr. Ambedkar to convert to Buddhism. During the twenty-nine-year wait, Ambedkar tapped every other possibility to uplift and change marginalized communities' socio-politico-religious and economic conditions.

One of the iconic and enduring Satyagraha organized under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar and carried forward by his colleagues and followers was Kalaram temple entry Satyagraha. During the 1930s, Dr. Ambedkar had already spent his time and energy mobilizing marginalized communities and decided to engage with temple entry satyagraha. It was the phase he was

¹⁶⁹ Quoted in Zelliott, Eleanor. (2005:11). *Ambedkar's Conversion*. New Delhi: Critical Quest.

¹⁷⁰ Gore, M.S. (1993). *The Social Context of an Ideology*. Delhi: Sage Publication.

following the reformist approach to make the marginalized classes realize their place in Hindu society and make ground for many radical steps like religious conversion in the future. Dr. Ambedkar says, "I started the temple entry Satyagraha only because I felt that was the best way of energizing the depressed classes and making them conscious of their position."¹⁷¹

Satyagraha for religious reforms was one of the ways of social mobilization for Dr. Ambedkar. It can be seen what Ambedkar has to say about Satyagraha as Keer quotes Ambedkar

*"It is not that you can solve all your problems by satyagraha. This is only a request to the upper-class Hindu mind. This Satyagraha movement is going to prove whether the Hindu mind treats human beings as human beings. This satyagraha is to change the heart of Hindus. This movement will decide whether the Hindu mind regards humanity in the new age."*¹⁷²

Having recognized the social injustice within the Hindu system and brought it to the notice of others, Dr. Ambedkar organized some other radical acts, such as symbolically burning the classic Hindu law book, the Manu Smriti, which formalized discrimination against low castes. However, as per the definition given by the orthodox Hindu-nationalist leader of the Indian freedom struggle, Mr. Tilak said: "That which knits the people together is religion."¹⁷³ Suppose one must believe what orthodox Hindu leaders had to say about religion and apply the same to Hinduism. In that case, it does not qualify to be called a religion because the Hindu religion knits people together in no way. It perhaps divides humans and treats them with contempt, and there lies the life of

¹⁷¹ Quoted in Tartakov, Garry. (2005: 202), B R Ambedkar and Navayana Diksha, in Clarke and Robinson (ed). *Religious Conversion in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University press, 2005.

¹⁷² Keer, Dhananjay. (1981: 10). *Dr Ambedkar Life and Mission*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.

¹⁷³ Ambedkar, B.R. (2020: 113). *What way Emancipation*, Writing and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part III. Speech delivered by Dr. Ambedkar to the Bombay Presidency Mahar Conference, 31st May 1936, Bombay. Translated from the Marathi by Vasant W. Moon.

contradiction. In Hinduism, humans are controlled and governed by rules of prohibitions. Hinduism does not recognize a man as a man. It is a religion where the touch of animals is permitted and considered sacred, but the touch of human beings is prohibited and considered impure and polluting (Ambedkar, 2004, p. 16).¹⁷⁴ So nowhere the Hindu religion is living up to the definition of Mr. Tilak, who propagated and believed in the Hindu-nationalist idea of India. Everywhere it is dividing and separating humans; therefore, for Dr. Ambedkar, the Hindu religion is not a religion but a mockery.

When religion takes the meaning of unchallengeable belief, it becomes impossible to engage with it critically. In Hinduism, criticism of religion is not allowed. Therefore, it stops the critical engagement, and there begins the mental slavery in religion. Mahatma Phule has demonstrated this in his iconic essay Slavery.¹⁷⁵ This results in the transformation and conditioning of the believers into a closed society. The dynamics of religion are lost in a society where the meaning of religion is restricted to just identity. In such a society, religion is restricted to rituals or particular rites.

Jeffrelot (2005:121) quoted Bhagwan Das stating his thoughts on reforming Hinduism. He says,

"We aim to gain freedom. We are not interested in anything else at the moment. If we can gain freedom by conversion, why should we shoulder the responsibility of the freedom of the Hindu religion? And why should we waste our energy, time, labor, and money on that? Let there be no misunderstanding that the objective

¹⁷⁴ Ambedkar, B.R. (2004). *Conversion as Emancipation*, New Delhi: Critical Quest.

¹⁷⁵ See Phule, Jotirao. (2006). *Mahatma Phule Samagra Vangmaya*. Maharashtra State Sahitya ani Sanskruti Mandal, Mumbai. Edited by Keer, Dhananjay; Malashe, S.G; & Phadake, Yashavanta.

of our struggle is our liberation from Hinduism and not the reform of Hinduism. Our movement aims to achieve social, economic, and religious freedom for the untouchables. So far as untouchables are concerned, this freedom cannot be achieved except through conversion."¹⁷⁶

After continuously enlightening the caste minds to recognize the fundamental rights of humans to participate in public life, cultural activities, and festivals, temple entry, in 1935, Dr. Ambedkar finally concluded that freedom from inhuman life could be found only outside the Hindu religion. He declared, "although he was born a Hindu, he would not die a Hindu."¹⁷⁷

What constitutes the change in the act of conversion?

In his article "Can there be Conversion without Cultural Change?" Joel Robbins (2017) raised the question of the possibility of conversion without a cultural change. To answer that question, he argued that it is not possible and said conversion requires some cultural change.¹⁷⁸ However, he also shed light on some of the notions scholars on Christian conversion often deploy, such as syncretism, which supports the notion that nothing much changes in culture after conversion. In this context, Robbins (2009)¹⁷⁹ argued that one should consider if new values, or new relationships between existing values, are shaping the relationship between elements (both old and new) in a culture rather than counting up old and new elements to ascertain whether a change has occurred. Robbins (2009:65)¹⁸⁰ used Dumont's approach to understand the relationship between culture and

¹⁷⁶ Cited in Jeffrelot, Christophe. (2005:121). *Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste*. London: Hurst & Company.

¹⁷⁷ Ambedkar, B.R. (2014). Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17. Part III.

¹⁷⁸ Robbins, Joel. (2017). Can there be Conversion without Cultural Change? *Mission Studies*, 34 (2017), pp. 29-52.

¹⁷⁹ Robbins, Joel. (2009). Conversion, Hierarchy, and Cultural Change: Value and Syncretism in the Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. In Rio, Kunt M and Smedal, Olaf H. (eds), *Hierarchy: Persistence and Transformation in Social Formations*. Berghahn Books.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid

values. According to Dumont (1980),¹⁸¹ radical cultural change should only be considered to have occurred after introducing new values or when the relationship between old values has changed.

Conversion to new religion always comes after another culture and tradition of the past. Most of the time, parts of that past remain valuable even after conversion. Dumont (1980)¹⁸² suggests that people prioritize cultural changes in such situations. They do that through hierarchical arrangements of cultural elements. The less valued cultural elements come to be reduced and restricted, and it does not contradict more valued elements. Dumont calls more valued elements in hierarchical arrangements of culture the “paramount value” of culture. In Dumont’s model of culture, every culture is dominated by a paramount value delineating its structure in its broadest outline.

While applying this theoretical framework, we can understand some traditions that remain important even after conversion. Buddhism came into existence as a counter-culture to the oppressive Brahmanical culture at the time of Buddha. Even at its revival, it emerged as an alternative to Hinduism for Dalits in India when Dr. Ambedkar led the conversion movement to Buddhism in 1956. In this conversion, the caste system's paramount value got replaced with Buddhism's paramount values, such as principles of equality and fraternity. Therefore, conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism also means there should be a shift in the paramount values. Therefore, it is crucial to assess whether there has been a genuine change in values since Dalits embraced

¹⁸¹ Quoted in Robbins, Joel. (2009). Conversion, Hierarchy, and Cultural Change: Value and Syncretism in the Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. In Rio, Kunt M and Smedal, Olaf H. (eds), *Hierarchy: Persistence and Transformation in Social Formations*. Berghahn Books.

¹⁸² Ibid

Buddhism, a religion that affirms the value of every individual as a human being, upholds equality, provides the advantages of liberty, and fosters fraternity.

Apart from value changes, certain cultural practices among newly converted Buddhists continue to be observed as when they were Hindus. As Robbins (2009)¹⁸³ talked about syncretism in Christian conversion, similarly, Buddhists in Maharashtra are also confined to the notion that nothing much has changed in the culture of *Mahars* after their conversion to Buddhism. However, it is necessary to look from the perspective of paramount value, as argued by Dumont. Similarly, taking a critical approach is necessary to determine which parts of the past culture remain valuable and which do not when we look at how newly converted Buddhists in Maharashtra have structured their culture.

Buddhism and Ritualistic aspects of the Religious Conversion:

The question raised frequently is whether it is mandatory to undergo the Deeksha ritual to become a Buddhist. Two different opinions are floating amongst Buddhists in Maharashtra. First, they say it is integral to undergo the Deeksha ritual to become a Buddhist. They often cite Ambedkar's example, saying that if it were not mandatory to undergo the Deeksha ritual, Dr. Ambedkar himself would have rejected it. For these people, Dr. Ambedkar becomes the reference point. For a long time, it was never challenged. However, as people started reading about Buddhism and Buddhist literature and saw people who had undergone the conversion ritual and continued to practice Hindu rituals, they started to question the necessity of the conversion ritual.

¹⁸³ Robbins, Joel. (2009). Conversion, Hierarchy, and Cultural Change: Value and Syncretism in the Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. In Rio, Kunt M and Smedal, Olaf H. (eds), *Hierarchy: Persistence and Transformation in Social Formations*. Berghahn Books.

For them, Buddhist values are sufficient, as Buddha had never given any importance to rituals. They argue that if one has undergone a conversion ritual and still does not practice Buddhism in their day-to-day life, they are not Buddhist. For Buddha practice of values was important. Therefore, the opponents of ritualistic conversion believe that practicing Buddhism in day-to-day life is more important than any ritualistic confirmation. Therefore, they believe living according to Buddhist principles is enough to claim Buddhist status and a conversion ritual is unnecessary.

Buddhists believe that Buddha never claimed that he knows a complete truth and can only take people to salvation. Buddha never claimed the highest status for himself in Buddhist Sangha. He created it for those who wish to join him in practicing life philosophy in their day-to-day life. What differentiates Buddhism from others is that, unlike others, Buddha never gave a set of rituals for the followers of his principles. Buddha taught his followers to break the rut of ritualistic life, and anyone can question his principles.

Religion is also viewed as ancestral property and passes by default from one generation to another like an inherited property. Ambedkar, while addressing the doubts raised against the genuineness of conversion, argues that "the conversion of the untouchables, if it did take place, would take after full deliberation of the value of religion and the virtue of the different religions. How can such a conversion be said to be not a genuine conversion? On the other hand, it would be the first case in the history of genuine conversion. It is, therefore, difficult to understand why anybody should doubt the genuineness of the conversion of the untouchables."¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁴ Ambedkar, B.R. (2016: 404-05). *Away from the Hindus*, In Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 5.

Dr. Ambedkar rejected the idea of the inheritance of religion. According to him, conversion refers to a person's choice to join a particular faith after carefully considering its benefits. Therefore, there is a difference between those who choose their religion and adopt it and those who inherit it. In the Hindu religion, one is born into a caste and becomes Hindu. Therefore, there is no scope for choice. The religious status in the Hindu religion is inherited. Suppose one accepts religion without knowing its values, principles, and virtue. In that case, it falls under the same category as those who treat religion as a piece of their ancestral property.

For Dr. Ambedkar, the decision to convert is a sensible step taken by an individual after due deliberation about the values and the virtue of the religion to which one is converting. For this reason, there is a need for conversion rituals to affirm that the decision to join a particular religious faith is taken after a complete understanding of the values and principles of the religion. There should be a difference between those who have chosen their religion and those who have inherited it. To avoid the persistence of the inheritance of religion in Buddhism, the next generation of those who inherit the faith from their parents must also undergo Deeksha rituals, as it is a decision taken with full consciousness and understanding of the values and principles of Buddhism.

However, there was no conversion ceremony, i.e., for becoming a lay disciple of the Buddha.¹⁸⁵ Whatever conversion formality Buddhists practiced was for becoming a *Bhikku*, for entering the Buddha's Sangha. Without such formal initiation, Buddhism among laities was also reduced to the inherited religion. To do away with this confusion about whether to undergo a

¹⁸⁵ Ambedkar, B.R. (2020: 509). *Buddhist Movement in India: A Blue Print*, In Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part III.

conversion ritual, Dr. Ambedkar argues for the importance of rituals and ceremonies in the life of individuals. He says,

*"I have believed that the conversion of the laity is not a conversion at all. It is only a nominal thing. Besides worshipping the Buddha, the so-called Buddhist laity continued to worship other Gods and Goddesses, which the Brahmins set up to destroy Buddhism. Buddhism disappeared from India largely of this wavering attitude of the laity. If Buddhism is to be firmly established in India, the laity must be exclusively tied to it... To remove this dangerous evil in Buddhism, I have prepared a formula that I call Dhamma Deeksha. Everyone who wishes to be converted to Buddhism shall have to undergo the ceremony. Otherwise, he will not be regarded as a Buddhist."*¹⁸⁶

Like the Baptism ceremony in Christianity for the laity, Buddhism also needed the introduction of the Deeksha ceremony. Among Christians, there are two different ceremonies; the first is for ordination to become priests, and the second is for baptism to show acceptance of Christianity. In Buddhism, there was no such ceremony as baptism. It was one of the main reasons people still practiced their old religious traditions and slipped out of Buddhism after becoming Buddhist. Keeping this in mind, Dr. Ambedkar created a ritual like the Christian baptism every layperson must go through to be referred to as a Buddhist. Dr. Ambedkar mentioned the two types of Conversions: The first is conversion to the Order of *Bhikkus*, commonly called the Sangha. The second is converting into an *Upasaka*, a lay follower of the Buddha's Dhamma. Even during the

¹⁸⁶ Ambedkar, B.R. (2016:430). *Buddhism Disappeared from India due to Wavering Attitude of the Laity*. In Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part I.

time of Buddha, except on four points, there were not many differences in the way of life between the *Bhikku* and the *Upasaka*.

The *Upasak* and the *Bhikku* must observe specific rules in their life. Dr. Ambedkar explained the difference between *Upasaka* and *Bhikku* in the Buddha and his Dhamma. To become a *Bhikku*, one must undergo a ceremony called *Upasampada*. After the ceremony, *Bhikkus* remain wanderers and stay away from their families. They must take vows, and if they breach them, they lose their membership in Buddhist Sangha.

On the other hand, there is no ceremony for a layperson to enter into Dhamma and become an *Upasaka*. An *Upasaka* remains a householder, whereas a *Bhikku* becomes a homeless wanderer. However, *Upasaka* must follow Buddhist principles to the best of their abilities while continuing to stay with family and can also have property. The Buddha converted whoever came to him either as *Bhikku* or as *Upasaka*. Dr. Ambedkar explained the difference between both, "An *Upasaka* could become a *Bhikku* whenever he felt like it. Moreover, a *Bhikku* had to cease to be a *Bhikku* when he committed a breach of the major vows or wished to give up his membership of the Order."¹⁸⁷

Dr. Ambedkar was inspired and influenced by the Theravada Buddhist practices he observed in Sri Lanka. Dr. Ambedkar, in his speech delivered at “the conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists” held at Candy, Sri Lanka, said that

"I am an interested observer, not a delegate. I came here with some very serious purpose..... The definite objects of my visit are first, to see Buddhist Ceremonial.

¹⁸⁷ Ambedkar, B.R. (2014: 114-15), *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, In Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 11.

*Ceremonial is an important part of religion. Whatever rationalists might say, a ceremony is a very essential thing in religion. By coming here, I thought I would be able to see the ritual that formed part and parcel of Buddhism."*¹⁸⁸

Dr. Ambedkar was interested in discovering the extent to which the Buddha's religion is practiced in its unblemished purity and the degree to which His Gospel is encrusted with superstition and ideas that are at odds with Buddhism and the Buddha's doctrines. As he believed that ceremonies and rituals are integral and important parts of religion, it is unavoidable not to follow rituals during Buddhist ceremonies. However, at the same time, these rituals are not rigid, and there is always scope for improvement and change. In the matter of the Deeksha ceremony, it is not merely uttering the *Pancha Shila*. While presiding over the conversion ceremony of laities in 1956, Dr. Ambedkar included other significant elements intended to give a person the impression that they are transitioning from being a member of a particular caste to a new person. While converting in 1956, Dr. Ambedkar introduced 22 vows to Buddhist converts to guide them in a state of confusion and contradiction with Hindu beliefs and practices. Those 22 vows were given in Marathi; Gail Omvedt (2003:261-62)¹⁸⁹ translated it as follows:

1. I shall have no faith in Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesh, nor shall I worship them.
2. I shall have no faith in Rama and Krishna, who are believed to be incarnations of God, nor shall I worship them.

¹⁸⁸ Ambedkar, B.R. (2020: 404), *Non-Believers Should be Converted to the Eight-Fold Path*, In Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part III.

¹⁸⁹ Omvedt, Gail. (2003). *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste*. New Delhi: Sage.

3. I shall have no faith in 'Gauri,' Ganapati, and other gods and goddesses of Hindus, nor shall I worship them.
4. I do not believe in the incarnation of God.
5. I do not and shall not believe that Lord Buddha was the incarnation of Vishnu. I believe this to be sheer madness and false propaganda.
6. I shall not perform '*Shraddha*' nor shall I give '*pinda-dan.*'
7. I shall not act in a manner violating the principles and teachings of the Buddha.
8. I shall not allow any ceremonies to be performed by Brahmins.
9. I shall believe in the equality of man.
10. I shall endeavor to establish equality.
11. I shall follow the 'noble eightfold path' of the Buddha.
12. I shall follow the 'paramitas' prescribed by the Buddha.
13. I shall have compassion and loving-kindness for all living beings and protect them.
14. I shall not steal.
15. I shall not tell lies.
16. I shall not commit carnal sins.
17. I shall not take intoxicants like liquor, drugs, etc.

18. I shall endeavor to follow the noble eightfold path and practice compassion and loving-kindness in everyday life.
19. I renounce Hinduism, which is harmful to humanity and impedes the advancement and development of humanity because it is based on inequality, and adopt Buddhism as my religion.
20. I firmly believe the Dhamma of the Buddha is the only true religion.
21. I believe that I am having a rebirth.
22. I solemnly declare and affirm that I shall hereafter lead my life according to the principles and teachings of the Buddha and his Dhamma.

Since it was a new beginning for people, these vows helped new converts understand the basic Buddhist teachings in simple words. It also helped clarify profane in the religious life and identity construction among converted Buddhists from the Mahar caste in Maharashtra. This revival of Buddhism in Maharashtra opened the horizon of Buddha's universal thoughts and philosophy. The 22 vows seek people to abandon the mythical relation of man to God and make them think that God is not someone who can help the oppressed. Buddhism is not a religion that traps its followers in the circle of how a man can see himself in relation to God, but how he can make sense of himself with all the events that happen around him.

Conclusion: Conceptualizing religious conversion as a protest against inequalities of Caste

It is evident that even after constitutional safeguards, special Acts, and political provisions for the protection of Dalits, caste atrocities and discrimination against Dalits continue to occur. It continued to happen because of the religious scriptures' oppressive structure of caste sacrilege. It

can be argued that untouchability, based on notions of purity and pollution, has its roots in religious ideas. The subjugation of marginalized lives through discrimination and denial of equality stems from religious concepts. Therefore, a change in religion is necessary for a society to transition from one that supports discrimination as part of its sacred principles to one that favors equality (Ambedkar, 2004).¹⁹⁰

The act of conversion to Buddhism is understood as “rejecting discriminatory practices” inscribed by the dominant section of society and “inventing more inclusive and equal practices.” As Roberts (2016:9)¹⁹¹ argues, conversion is based on considerations of what that God can do for the worshippers in this world. However, the conversion of marginalized castes to Buddhism here is not about which God to worship. It is a matter of identity— “transcended Buddhist identity,” which is equal. Through conversion, they see “freedom from oppression.” It is considered a “liberation from old social alignments” and a “release from old religious ideas” imposed on them. Therefore, they claim “equal identity” and human self through religion.

Through the conversion, the lower caste communities and leaders registered their protests and asserted their equal status. They are also trying to reclaim symbols of authority to deprive oppressor castes of their symbolic significance and protest against the unethical distribution of power and socio-economic and political opportunities. It rejects the oppressor castes' ideological hegemony. It denies them the possibility to co-opt them as a sect among the larger religious identity of Hindus. This remains the basic element of my analytical framework to look at religious conversion as a form of protest against caste inequalities.

¹⁹⁰ Ambedkar, B.R. (2004). *Conversion as Emancipation*. New Delhi: Critical Quest.

¹⁹¹ Roberts, Nathaniel. (2016: 9). *To Be Cared for: The Power of Conversion and Foreignness of Belonging in an Indian Slum*. New Delhi: Navayana.

Chapter Three

Ambedkarites in Making: The Process of Awakening among Non-Mahar Communities in Maharashtra

"You must take the stand that Buddha took. . . You must have the courage to tell the Hindus that what is wrong with them is their religion-the religion which has produced in them this notion of the sacredness of Caste. Will you show that courage?"

(Ambedkar, 2014: 69, Vol.1)¹⁹²

Introduction:

The previous chapter has shown how scholars have presented Buddhist discourse in India and Maharashtra. It has been characterized as a means of resistance and emancipation for the former untouchable caste Mahars (Beltz, 2005; Fuchs, 2004; Zelliot, 2004; Omvedt, 2003; Fitzgerald, 1997). Given that most of the converts belonged to the *Mahar* castes, it was natural to see the number of studies dealing with the Buddhist conversion movement in Maharashtra revolving around the experiences of Buddhist conversion of the *Mahar* caste. However, there were few examples of non-*Mahar* castes converted to other religions, mainly to Christianity and a few to Buddhism. However, still, the majority of non-*Mahar* communities did not give a thought to

¹⁹² Ambedkar, B.R. (1979: 69). *Annihilation of Caste*, In Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 1.

conversion. There could be many reasons why they stayed away from the conversion movement when millions of others took the conversion path for their emancipation.

The aura of Dr. Ambedkar and his contribution to the upliftment of marginalized communities has gotten him a significant position in the lives of marginalized communities. However, it was restricted to the *Mahar* identity of Dr. Ambedkar and therefore reduced to one caste. Given that graded inequality is a unique feature of caste, castes are placed above one another in the vertical hierarchy (Ambedkar, 1979, p. 72).¹⁹³ This hierarchical position of caste and contempt for each other is not restricted to upper castes; it is also followed within low castes. The contempt for each other among castes reduced Buddhism to that of the *Mahar* religion as Dr. Ambedkar himself was a *Mahar*, and Buddhist converts were also from the *Mahar* caste in Maharashtra. Therefore, the hierarchical way in which caste functions remained the monster and one of the reasons why Buddhism was reduced to one caste.

However, in the recent past, in the post-Ambedkar era of the conversion movement in Maharashtra, people belonging to non-*Mahar* castes coming from different social backgrounds, constitutionally categorized as Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC) have adopted Buddhism. It has now become the collective protest discourse of different castes and tribes. Dr. Ambedkar, as a persona, has left a more significant impact on the anti-caste movement in contemporary Maharashtra. It influenced individuals to take up organized efforts to reach out and take the anti-caste movement to the masses in their capacities.

In this chapter, I will dwell upon the post-Ambedkar development of the Ambedkarite anti-caste movement in Maharashtra in general and the Marathwada region of Maharashtra in

¹⁹³ Ambedkar, B.R. (1979). Annihilation of Caste, in Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol.1.

particular, which has a grip on the anti-caste activists and the leaders coming from non-*Mahar* castes. I have briefly discussed the journey of these non-*Mahar* leaders in the process of becoming Ambedkarite and further taking the ideology of Ambedkarism to their respective communities in various ways. Marathwada, as the region, has seen several events and movements like BAMCEF, and Namantar Movement,¹⁹⁴ violence inflicted upon the Dalit community post-Namantar event has a more significant impact on the region. Therefore, I have also briefly described the impact of such movements on developing an anti-caste leadership in the Marathwada region.

Ambedkar, on spreading Buddhism in India, how should Buddhist missionaries approach their work?

In a memorandum submitted to the Buddhist Sasana Council of Burma in 1954, Ambedkar (2020:506-11)¹⁹⁵ reasoned the need for religion for downtrodden and oppressed identities. Ambedkar rightly pointed out that the poor and marginalized need religion if it is the right religion. Religion gives hope for betterment, and the poor have nothing but hope for a better future. On the other hand, the rich have everything. I refer to the concept rich here in the Indian context to denote upper caste privileged castes. They can be poor by material possessions but not with their privileged place as upper caste and continue to hold on to their socio-cultural capital. They need not live on the same kind of hope on which low caste and people from marginalized communities live.

¹⁹⁴ The Namantar was a long-standing demand from Dalits to change the name of Marathwada University to Babasaheb Ambedkar University, Aurangabad. It took a violent turn after Maharashtra Government passed the order to officially change the name. Upper caste inflicted atrocities against Dalits in general and Mahar Community in specific in the Marathwada region.

¹⁹⁵ Ambedkar, B.R. (2020: 506-11), *Buddhist Movement in India: A Blue Print*, In Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part III.

Ambedkar gave an example of Christian missionaries in Rome and compared it with Christian missionaries in India. The poor class first accepted Christianity in Rome as it was downtrodden people who needed the hope that religion brought. Contrary to what happened in Rome, Christian missionaries focused on Brahmins while entering India as a missionary religion and invested their energy in converting them to Christianity. They thought Brahmins were the leaders of Hindus; therefore, other low castes would follow them and convert to Christianity. Ambedkar argued that the Christian missionaries made a mistake by first taking Christianity to Brahmins as the colonizers entered India.

Upper castes live on their possessions, economic as well as socio-cultural-political privileges. The present socio-religious structure works in their favor. There is no surprise to see how Christian missionaries failed to attract Brahmins and other upper castes to convert to Christianity in India. Brahmins did not essentially convert to Christianity as they had every possible advantage within Hinduism. Christian missionaries wasted hundreds of years converting Brahmins (Ambedkar, 2020, p. 506-11).¹⁹⁶

As a result, they could not focus on the most marginalized and hence failed to attract more people from lower castes to their fold. Therefore, Ambedkar urged the Buddhist missionaries to concentrate on its lower-class population if they looked at the spread of Buddhism in India. The downtrodden and poor classes in India need a religion like Buddhism, which is the right type that ennobles people, elevates them, and has hope for a better future. Therefore, Ambedkar focused

¹⁹⁶ Ambedkar, B.R. (2020: 506-11), *Buddhist Movement in India: A Blue Print*, In Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part III.

mainly on marginalized communities while convincing them for religious conversion to Buddhism.

Renaissance of Navayana Buddhism in Maharashtra: led by Dr. Ambedkar and followed by the *Mahars*

Politicizing the masses is the first step toward conversion to Buddhism, as it is a conscious decision to choose a particular ideology and politics. Buddhism is an ideology, philosophy, and principle to follow for a dignified life. Abandoning the Hindu religion and adopting Buddhism is a long and courageous process. One must undergo long churning of thoughts and ideas before consciously choosing Buddhism as their religion. Until Ambedkar's conversion in 1956, Buddhism had almost been extinguished from the land where it originated, flourished, and spread across the continent. It existed in a few pockets of India, scattered and excluded. In the aftermath of Ambedkar's revival of Buddhism, it got new momentum and was revitalized.

It is argued by Stroud (2017:328)¹⁹⁷ that Buddhism got extinguished in India because there was a lack of versatile and conquering orators who could reach out to the masses and make it easy for them to understand Buddhist principles. Thus, Buddhism, its teachings, principles, and philosophy needed to be ingrained in its new followers to revive Buddhism in a true sense, as most of the Buddhist followers came from lay and untrained backgrounds. Ambedkar believed that one of the obstacles to the propagation of Buddhism is that Buddhism does not have one single comprehensive document of Buddha's gospel.¹⁹⁸ Lay Buddhists cannot go through all 73 volumes

¹⁹⁷ Stroud, Scott R. (2017: 328), The Rhetoric of Conversion as Emancipatory Strategy in India: Bhimrao Ambedkar, Pragmatism, and the Turn to Buddhism. *Rhetorica*, Vol. XXXV, Issue 3, The International Society for the History of Rhetoric. Pp. 314-345.

¹⁹⁸ Ambedkar, B.R. (2020: 508). *Buddhist Movement in India: A Blue Print*. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part III. A memorandum submitted by Ambedkar to Buddhist Sasana Council of Burma on 19th July 1954, he put forward the proposal for spreading the Buddhism in India.

of the Pali Buddhist canons. Firstly, most Buddhist people in India were illiterate and did not know the Pali language. Therefore, Ambedkar proposed the need to produce a document of Buddha's Gospel to realize the dream of spreading Buddhism in India and other parts of the world. The Buddhist Sasana Council of Burma, where Ambedkar proposed the idea of writing the Buddha's Gospel, did not pay much attention to proposals made by Ambedkar. Therefore, Ambedkar had to take responsibility for himself by writing a book on Buddha's Gospel.

Ambedkar knew he had little time with him, given his ill health and mammoth task. Ambedkar passed away within two months of his conversion to Buddhism, and his fear of his ill health and less time with him became a reality. Ambedkar did not get much time to germinate Buddhist teachings and culture amongst new converts after his conversion. However, he could take care of writing about Buddha's life, philosophy, and teachings as he produced Buddha's Gospel. As a result, we have Buddha's Gospel in the form of "The Buddha and His Dhamma," Ambedkar's masterpiece on Buddhism. Ambedkar also gave twenty-two owes (refer to chapter two) to the new converts summarizing the rationalistic Buddhist gospel in simple owes accessible to all. Since it was a new beginning for the lay Buddhists, the owes given by Ambedkar played a crucial role in guiding people through the state of confusion and contradictions about the teachings and philosophy of Buddhism while practicing it in day-to-day life (Omvedt, 2003).¹⁹⁹

One of the reasons given by converts is to choose Buddhism, as this religion stands for scientific rationality and does not give much importance to conventional and conservative religious rituals and practices. However, it still has some sets of rituals and rites of passage. The religious rituals adopted, invented, and accepted by Navayana Buddhists are different. Though some rituals

¹⁹⁹ Omvedt, Gail. (2003). *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste*. New Delhi: Sage.

are inspired or taken from other schools of Buddhism- Theravada Buddhism, to be precise, they are accepted based on the non-hierarchical nature of the practice. Some of the rituals are invented by the new Buddhist community. It is an addition to the world of Buddhism. As Ambedkar said, "The greater responsibility lies on the shoulders of the Bhikkhus (Buddhist monks) if the attempt to revive Buddhism is to be a success. They must come out of their 'shell' and be with the first rank fighting force!"²⁰⁰ Ambedkar believed that lay Buddhists may get confused about which way to go when it comes to interpreting Buddhist principles and leading spiritual life and rituals of religion. There comes the responsibility of Buddhist monks to take Buddhism to people and guide them in leading their life on Buddhist principles.

To a certain extent, *Bhikkus* (Buddhist monks) succeeded in stabilizing the Buddhist life world in urban spaces.²⁰¹ As there are two types of converts (discussed in the second chapter), the first is conversion to Buddhist Sangha as *Bhikkus*- Buddhist monks, and the second is the conversion of lay Buddhists/ householders as Upasaka. Bhikkus train Buddhist monks. The *Bhikku* Sangha is an old organization that functions across India, and its primary purpose is to select, transmit and interpret Buddha's words.²⁰² It trains the *Bhikkus* (Buddhist Monks) to reach out to the masses to transmit Buddha's philosophy and administer the ritualistic part of the Buddhist lifeworld. However, *Bhikkus* confined themselves to the Buddha Vihara and limited their role to administering the life cycle rituals on various occasions. The primary responsibility of taking

²⁰⁰ Quoted in Guru, Gopal. (1991). Hinduisation of Ambedkar in Maharashtra, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Feb. 16, 1991, Vol. 26, No. 7 (Feb. 16, 1991), pp. 339-341.

²⁰¹ See Kurane (1999) & Beltz (2005)

²⁰² Beltz, Johannes. (2005:199). *Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit Religious Conversion: Religious Conversion and Socio-Political Emancipation*, New Delhi: Manohar.

Buddhism to the masses and teaching them Buddhist philosophy required extensive traveling and frequent contact with local communities.

Since the *Bhikkus* confined themselves within Buddha Vihara, the responsibility of taking Buddhism to the masses falls on the shoulders of lay Buddhists. Beltz (2005:204)²⁰³ quoted Daya Pawar- a well-known Dalit activist and writer, "*The monks work to fill their own pockets... We do not like traditional Buddhism with monks. Look at the monks from Sri Lanka! They own luxury cars. We do not like such types of monks. We need missionaries and not Hindu sadhus.*" Ambedkar himself criticized monks for their ascetic attitude (Beltz, 2006).²⁰⁴ The Buddhist monk Ambedkar looked for a social worker who works among the community and not for himself. Daya Pawar problematizes the selfish nature of *Bhikkus* and compares them with Hindu sadhus who had exploited the marginalized communities for ages in the name of religion and religious rituals.

Similarly, Raja Dhale also criticizes Buddhist monks saying:

"The bhikkhus are useless in all senses of the term. Why do they teach in Pali, a language that no one understands? Why not in Marathi? We need social bhikkhus. Certainly, it is said that the Buddha founded the sangha. However, it is not proven. Probably the Buddha did found it. A monastic institution was in fashion at that time. Under his guidance . . . But after his death, the perversion and decadence of the sangha started. Some bad elements were introduced. The bhikkhus know nothing about Buddhism. Ambedkar had envisioned a different

²⁰³ Quoted in Beltz, Johannes. (2005: 204). Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit: Religious Conversion and Social-Political Emancipation in Contemporary Maharashtra. New Delhi: Manohar.

²⁰⁴ Beltz, Johannes. (2006). Dalit Buddhism:Re-evaluating a Category, *Dalit-International Newsletter*, Vol.11, No.1. Waterford. CT. Feb. 2006. Pp. 1-11.

*kind of monk. The bhikkhus must understand that Buddhism is not a spiritual movement with vipassana, peace of mind, rituals, etc. We are not this kind of Buddhist.... We aim for social upliftment. The traditional bhikkhus are spiritual. We need to create a new bhikkhu sangha. The bhikkhu should be a social worker.*²⁰⁵

Dhale emphasizes how Bhikkus can reach out and make lay Buddhists understand Buddhism's philosophy, principles, and teachings by staying in monasteries and away from lay followers. He also questions the medium of preaching. The majority of Buddhist laypeople do not have any knowledge of the Pali language. In such circumstances, there is no sense in making Buddha's teaching more complex by preaching it in a language the majority do not understand. It would be apt to preach Buddhism simplistically.

Nevertheless, there was always a dearth of trained *Bhikkus* in India. The new converts lack the resources to build institutional support to fill the gap. To fill this gap, Ambedkar (2020:508) suggested training lay Buddhists as a preacher who can take care of the immediate needs of the new converts at the local level.²⁰⁶ As everything was new and unknown for the lay Buddhists, it needed to be institutionalized, systematically taught, and spread among the masses. With the prime object of institutionalization and organizing the religion, Ambedkar founded the Buddhist Society of India, whose primary aim was to spread Buddhism amongst people, impart Buddhist teaching to new converts and cater to the requirement of Buddhist preachers at the local level.

²⁰⁵ Quoted in Beltz, Johannes. (2005: 204). *Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit: Religious Conversion and Social-Political Emancipation in Contemporary Maharashtra*. New Delhi: Manohar.

²⁰⁶ Ambedkar, B.R. (2020: 508). *Buddhist Movement in India: A Blue Print*. In Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part III.

The admirers and followers of Ambedkar who got influenced by enormous discipline and the committed life journey of Ambedkar turned into a highly motivated community, and politicized individuals turned into lay preachers. These lay preachers, called '*Baudhacharya*,' always emphasized self-respect and human dignity. *Baudhacharyas* loosely means the one who holds knowledge about Buddhism. *Baudhacharyas* majorly belonged to one community, particularly- *Mahar*, who spread Buddhism's ideas and philosophy across Maharashtra and the country as lay preachers. This is how the once-forgotten and extinguished religion of land got new patrons and followers amongst the mass led by Dr. Ambedkar from the *Mahar* community in the form of *Baudhacharya*- a lay Buddhist preacher.

Historically *Mahars* were treated as untouchables and reduced to outcaste impure bodies. Therefore, rejecting the imposed past identity as a member of the untouchable caste had become integral to constructing a new religious identity. Thus, the basis of a new identity as a Buddhist lies in a departure from old caste practices and the founding of new anti-caste practices which are more inclusive. Thus, *Mahar* converted to Buddhism and established an alternative life world for themselves. They identified themselves as Navayana/ Neo (New) Buddhists.²⁰⁷ *Mahars* had their deities discretely from other castes of Hindus. Post-conversion, these Hindu Gods and deities got abandoned by the converts from their sacred life and places of worship. Since there was no idol worship in Buddhism adopted by Ambedkar and with the exit of Gods, there was a vacuum in the life of new converts. That is where the organization of worship- places and the practice of paying homage to the ideals of Ambedkar and Buddha came to the forefront of Buddhism in Maharashtra.

²⁰⁷ Beltz, Johannes. (2005), *Mahar, Buddhist and Dalits: Religious Conversion and Socio-Political Emancipation in Contemporary Maharashtra*, New Delhi: Manohar.

Buddhists constructed Buddha *Vihara*, and places of worship got replaced with the images of Buddha and Ambedkar. Buddha *Vihara* has since become one of the essential tangible structures of Buddhists as a community gathering place. Unlike Hindu temples, Buddha *Vihara* is not a place of worship as no specific religious sanctity is attached to it. The term *Vihara* itself attempts to part away with terms like temple. Term temple is referred to and used to identify places where devotees worship and perform religious rituals to seek favors from Hindu Gods. On the other hand, in Buddha *Vihara*, only on specific days does the Buddhist community perform Buddha *puja*. Otherwise, Buddha *Vihara* is used for community gatherings and to impart knowledge and education about Buddhism and its morality, ethics, and values among its followers.²⁰⁸

Buddhists also invented their festivals distinct from those of Hindu festivals. They celebrate *Ambedkar Jayanti*, *Buddha Purnima*, *Dhammachakra Pravartan Divas*, *Mahaparinirvan Din*, etc., as their significant festivals. The Buddhists do not require the Brahmin priest to perform the rituals, as in Hinduism. They perform certain life cycle rituals and ceremonies not involving Brahmin priests and without Vedic rituals. In Buddhism, anyone who knows or can read the verses can preside over and oversee an event or program to perform the rituals. Though the translation of *Pali* verses is available in Marathi, the verses are still recited in *Pali* during the life cycle rituals of Buddhists, such as wedding rituals, death rituals, etc. This constitutes a significant part of an assertion of a new religious identity as a Buddhist.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁸ Ghadage, Tushar. (2015). *Multiple Religious Identities among Dalits and Implication of Atrocity Act: Case of Mahars from Rural Maharashtra* (Unpublished MPhil thesis). Department of Anthropology, University of Hyderabad.

²⁰⁹ See Ghadage, Tushar. (2015). *Multiple Religious Identities among Dalits and Implication of Atrocity Act: Case of Mahars from Rural Maharashtra* (Unpublished MPhil thesis). Department of Anthropology, University of Hyderabad.

A *Mahar*-Centered Buddhist Movement and hostility between *Mahars* and *Matangs* in Maharashtra

All Indian monastic communities are influenced significantly by the Maharashtrian Bhikkhusangha. There are many bhikkhus and bhikkhunis of *Mahar* origin today (Beltz, 2005).²¹⁰ Among lay Buddhists, as most converts are from *Mahar*, the *Baudhacharyas* also belong to the *Mahar* community. Therefore, *Mahar's* dominance in the Buddhist circle is much evident. Though *Mahars* have contributed substantially to the revival of Buddhism in Maharashtra, they were also confined to *Mahar* converts. Apart from *Mahars* being the majority in number amongst all Scheduled Castes in Maharashtra and their dominance in Buddhist discourse, Non-*Mahar* Scheduled Castes always had accused *Mahars* that they take most of the benefits of reservation in education and government employment. They are also accused of taking a substantial share of other SC castes in political realms. Because of this, *Mahars* could progress, and others remain poor and marginalized among SC castes. Gokhale (1993)²¹¹ also lists the factors responsible for the conflict between the *Mahar* and the *Matang* communities: the reasons she listed are the monopolization of various government schemes by the *Mahars*, the feeling of mutual suspicion, the controversy over the Buddhist conversion, and the passing-over of traditional occupations of the *Mahars* to the *Matangs*.

Against the accusation of monopolization of *Mahars* on various government schemes, *Mahars* respond by saying that they could make whatever little progress they have made compared to other SC castes in Maharashtra is also because of their religious conversion from Hinduism to

²¹⁰ See Beltz, Johannes. (2005:200). *Mahar, Buddhist and Dalits: Religious Conversion and Socio-Political Emancipation in Contemporary Maharashtra*. New Delhi: Manohar.

²¹¹ Quoted in Guru, Gopal. (1995). One Dimensional view of Dalit Movement, book review article. *Economic and Political Weekly*, (January 14, 1995). pp. 98-102.

Buddhism. Since they do not follow Hinduism and free themselves from religious obligations and caste occupation, they are freed from carrying the burden of religious myths and rituals attached to them. Buddhists converted from the *Mahar* caste no longer employ themselves in any caste occupations imposed on them by caste Hindus. Since they are freed from all these burdens, they could focus on education and benefit from the reservation. Conversion to Buddhism gave them a launching platform, offering them freedom of mind. They no longer consider themselves lower than anyone. It has helped them overcome the mental barrier and compete with others with dignity.

Pillai-Vetschera (1994:46)²¹² remarks, "*Matangs* and *Mahars*, the two major SC castes of Maharashtra, had traditional rivalries that revolved around competition for a better share in the local organization of a caste economy in which *Mahars* were placed higher in the order than *Matangs*. *Matangs* and *Mahars*, thus, lived in proximity and permanent animosity." As discussed earlier, the *Mahars* have progressed in the economic, social, and political spheres compared to other Scheduled castes. They took advantage of whatever little opportunities were available, given their mobility as a community. Guru (1995:98-102)²¹³ contemplates that attention needs to be given to why the *Matangs* were left behind in sharing whatever limited opportunities come to the marginalized communities. Why did it take time for *Matangs* to become mobile?

Guru (1995)²¹⁴ argues that the traditional skills and caste occupations like rope-making, basket-making, and broom-making kept the *Matangs* tied to the village economy. Compared to the *Matangs*, the *Mahars* were unskilled laborers. They were highly dependent on agricultural

²¹² Quoted in Waghmore, Suryakant. (2013:144). *Civility against Caste: Dalit Politics and Citizenship in Western India*. New Delhi: Sage Publication.

²¹³ See Guru, Gopal. (1995). One Dimensional view of Dalit Movement, book review article. *Economic and Political Weekly*, (January 14, 1995). pp. 98-102.

²¹⁴ Guru, Gopal. (1995). One Dimensional view of Dalit Movement, book review article. *Economic and Political Weekly*, (January 14, 1995). pp. 98-102.

labor, and due to the growing pressure of agrarian unemployment caused by the de-peasantization of the cultivating non-Dalit castes under British colonialism, the *Mahars* took to education for survival (Guru, 1995). They were numerically larger and hence had to face early displacement from the village because there were no or fewer employment opportunities available within the village. As *Mahars* moved from villages to urban areas in search of a job and education, the early response to available government facilities from *Mahars* was natural.

Guru also argued that the *Matangs* started migrating to urban areas from the 1970s onwards. During this period, their primary occupation of rope-making was mechanized. The ropes produced through the mechanical process by Garware Nylon Industries were of good quality and cheaply available (Guru, 1995: 98-102).²¹⁵ This subverted the traditional occupation of the *Matangs* in a big way. Guru responded to the accusation that *Mahars* took the share of other SC castes in employment opportunities by saying, "consequently, at the time the *Matangs* arrived in the developmental process, they found the jobs were already taken, and there was stagnation in terms of job opportunity and other avenues of progress. Instead of understanding these processes that underlie the structure of inequality, the *Matangs* hold the *Mahars* responsible for their backwardness. These hostile anti-*Mahar* feelings are inflamed by the interested parties, sometimes leading to clashes between these two communities (Guru, 1995, p. 98-102)."²¹⁶

The animosity and hostility among *Mahar* and *Matang* communities have also been reflected in the political mobilization based on the bifurcation of the SC reservation quota.

²¹⁵ Guru, Gopal. (1995) One Dimensional view of Dalit Movement, book review article. *Economic and Political Weekly*, (January 14, 1995). pp. 98-102.

²¹⁶ Guru, Gopal. (1995) One Dimensional view of Dalit Movement, book review article. *Economic and Political Weekly*, (January 14, 1995). pp. 98-102.

Waghmore (2013:148),²¹⁷ while highlighting the hostility among *Mahar* and *Matang*, says, "Mang"²¹⁸ political mobilization in recent times has also been a product of anti-*Mahar* feelings with a call for separate representation for Mang within SC quotas. The politicization of Mang and formation of new collective identities is also a reaction to *Mahar* dominance." Most of the time, mobilization among the *Matang* community has been done by antagonizing *Mahars* and provoking *Matangs*. It became fertile ground for Hindutva ideology to grow. This is also reflected in the *Matang* caste remaining at bay from the anti-caste movement and Buddhist conversion discourse in Maharashtra. Most of them were tapped by RSS and associated with the Hindutva agenda. It can be seen in how *Matang* leadership and the masses responded to Ambedkar's call for conversion. Shailaja Paik (2007) argued that "*Matang* leaders had historically opposed temple entry efforts for untouchables initiated by Ambedkar and had sided with Brahmins; similar was their opposition to the idea of conversions to Buddhism (Paik, 2007, p. 173–187)."²¹⁹

The hostility among *Mahars* and *Matangs* remains one of the examples of how caste plays a role in antagonizing communities, which results in division amongst the most marginalized. *Mahars* accuse *Matangs* of being a traitor and docile community without self-respect. Waghmore (2013:150) highlights this hostility between *Mahars* and *Matangs*; he argues that "*Mangs* are, thus, considered docile for not radically revolting against traditional inequalities of caste, not converting to Buddhism, not following Ambedkar's call for education, and not giving up traditional polluting occupations of caste."²²⁰ Therefore, as Guru argues, one must also talk about what and why other

²¹⁷ See Waghmore, Suryakant. (2013). *Civility against Caste: Dalit Politics and Citizenship in Western India*. New Delhi: Sage Publication.

²¹⁸ Waghmore (2013) used the word Mang to refer Matangs. Matang is more sanskritized form of the term mang. Mangs prefer to identify themselves as Matangs as Mang is also used as derogatory term.

²¹⁹ Paik, Shailaja. (2007). *Daughters of the Lesser God: Dalit Women's Education in Postcolonial Pune*. pp. 173-87.

²²⁰ Waghmore, Suryakant. (2013). *Civility Against Caste: Dalit Politics and Citizenship in Western India*. New Delhi: Sage.

castes avoided the Ambedkarite movement. Also need to focus on how to bridge this gap between two crucial SC communities in Maharashtra and bring them into one-fold of the Anti-caste struggle to fight for the common goal of annihilation of caste.

Anti-caste movement and Backward caste indifferences in Maharashtra

In contemporary scenarios, Castes categorized as Other Backward Classes (OBC)²²¹ proudly identify themselves as Hindus and observe all the vows prescribed by the Brahmin religion. In Maharashtra, the OBC community remained indifferent to non-Brahmin anti-caste movements and social reformers. Sandip Upare- OBC leader and entrepreneur, says, "OBC castes in Maharashtra are staunchly following Hinduism than the upper castes Hindus when it comes to following rituals. They follow the dharma and abide by all the rules without question. OBCs are the foot soldiers of Hindutva forces."²²² The OBC Hindus follow Brahmanical traditions and depend on Brahmins- priest castes that directly influence their socio-political, economic, religious, and cultural world. OBC castes being part of the Hindu religion and staunch believers and followers of the Hindu traditions, also face various kinds of discrimination. However, they remain silent on the degrading status of fellow human beings within Hinduism and never problematize the hierarchical social order as a community.

During Mandal agitations, when OBCs claimed their right of reserved quota in higher education and employment, upper-caste Hindus were against such affirmative actions for OBCs in

²²¹ OBC is one of several other terms used by the Government of India to classify the population based on their socially, and educationally disadvantaged position and to implement special provisions for the protection and the betterment of these disadvantaged castes.

²²² Field Notes. Interview with Sandip Upare on 6th April 2018. Sandip Upare is son of late Hanumant Upare, belongs to OBC community and leading the Satyashodhak OBC Parishad- a OBC lead organization in Maharashtra.

India (Ilaiah, 2006).²²³ On the other hand, the ones who stood with OBCs and their right to reservation in education and government jobs were the Dalits and Tribes communities. Although OBCs have always considered themselves staunch Hindus, why is there opposition to OBC reservation in education and employment from the upper castes? While OBCs are not against the upper-caste Hindu caste, they always identify as Hindus. Why are all the opponents of reservation upper-caste Hindus? OBC never problematized the interests of oppressor castes in opposing such policies, which are for the upward mobility of deprived classes. While the OBC community has a population of approximately 52 percent, we hardly see any organized efforts toward challenging the upper caste's supremacy in OBC communities.

At this juncture mentioning Mahatma Phule's anti-Brahmin agitation and his "non-Aryan doctrine" is appropriate here because, according to this theory, in a caste society, all lower castes are viewed as a community of oppressed since they collectively endure exploitation at the hands of oppressor castes (Omvedt, 1971).²²⁴ Mahatma Phule (2006:142)²²⁵ believed that all non-Brahmin castes were oppressed groups, and there was an urgent need for well-planned and coordinated activities to unify these disadvantaged castes and build an alliance to combat caste slavery.

However, Dr. Ambedkar cautioned that it is difficult to form an ally with the oppressed castes as there is graded inequality among them. It turned out to be accurate as most middle castes in the caste system allied with higher castes and distanced themselves from the at-the-time

²²³ See Ilaiah, Kancha. (2006). Merit of Reservations, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 41, No. 24, (Jun. 17-23, 2006), pp. 2447-2449.

²²⁴ Omvedt, Gail. (1971). Jotirao Phule and the ideology of social revolution in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 6, No. 37, pp. 1969-1979.

²²⁵ See Phule, Jotirao. (2006). *Mahatma Phule Samagra Vangmaya*. Maharashtra State Sahitya ani Sanskruti Mandal, Mumbai. Edited by Keer, Dhananjay; Malashe, S.G; & Phadake, Yashavanta.

untouchable low castes. Hindu nationalist forces also deemphasized the non-Aryan theory proposed by Phule. As a result, people belonging mainly to OBC castes joined themselves with oppressor castes. The non-Aryan concept has remained relevant to the ex-untouchables and tribal communities.²²⁶ Contrary to this, when it came to giving equal representation for OBCs in educational institutes, government jobs, and political representation for their social upliftment through the reservation, the ones who opposed it were all privileged castes.

It is clear from the above discussion that if one community dominates the social, economic, and political spheres, it has an impact on demonizing that community and polarizing others. People are already divided into different castes and have graded inequality among themselves. This benefited the oppressor communities by keeping all oppressed castes divided and not allowing them to unite against the social evil of caste and the discrimination associated with it. Separate castes cannot fight out and abolish caste. It requires a more extensive community base. Beltz (2004) argues that "caste is a much too complex social phenomenon to be abolished by a small minority fighting against the majority will."²²⁷ There were attempts made to forge the unity between ex-untouchable castes and non-Brahmin shudra castes from the social reformers like Phule. Such efforts are being carried forward by Ambedkarite forces in the country today.

Kanshiram and conception of intellectual class among marginalized groups

The entry of Kanshiram on the social and political fronts brought the much-needed vision for the social movement led by Dalits in the post-Ambedkar phase of the Dalit movement in India as it

²²⁶ Omvedt, Gail. (1971). Jotirao Phule and the ideology of social revolution in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 6, No. 37, pp. 1969-1979.

²²⁷ Beltz, Johannes. (2004). Contesting Caste, Hierarchy, and Hinduism: Buddhist Discursive Practices in Maharashtra, in Jondhale, Surendra and Beltz, Johannes. (eds), *Reconstructing the World: B R Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press.

helped them to assert their existence in a dignified way. Badri Narayan (2014:36) argues, "Kanshiram attempted to make people across the numerous Dalit castes aware of their economic, social and cultural subordination and how they could jointly liberate themselves through political empowerment."²²⁸ Kanshiram draws inspiration from the words of Ambedkar, who says political power is the master key to attaining social equality.²²⁹ He also said that political power without ideology would not yield much. Therefore, one must also build a solid ideological base to conquer political power.

Dr. Ambedkar mentioned the pre-condition of any revolution, and he argued, "The religious and social revolution of Buddha preceded the political revolution led by Chandragupta. The *varkari* saints brought about religious and social reforms before Shivaji launched his political revolution. The political revolution of the Sikhs was preceded by the religious and social revolution led by Guru Nanak (Ambedkar 1979:44)."²³⁰ Along similar lines, Kanshiram's political mobilization of numerous marginalized castes for social change also preceded by Ambedkar's social and religious revolution through Buddhism. Kanshiram's ideological base and structure of his political mobilization are based on Buddha's philosophy. As Beltz argues, "Buddhism is a fluid concept; it brings together several different meanings: a secularized moral order, specific ethics, social equality, universal fraternity, and democracy."²³¹ Kanshiram further invoked Bahujan icons such as Jotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Shahu Maharaj, Periyar Ramasami, Dr. Ambedkar, and

²²⁸ Narayan, Badri. (2014: 36). *Kanshiram: Leader of the Dalits*. New Delhi: Penguin.

²²⁹ Narayan, Badri. (2014: 36). *Kanshiram: Leader of the Dalits*. New Delhi: Penguin.

²³⁰ Quoted in Omvedt, Gail. (2005:251). *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and caste*. New Delhi: Sage.

²³¹ Beltz, Johannes. (2006). Dalit Buddhism: Re-evaluating the category. *Dalit- International News Letter*. Vol. 11. No.4. pp. 1-11.

other Bahujan anti-caste leaders to mobilize masses from different communities. All of them aimed to change the oppressive caste system.

Kanshiram worked with RPI and the Peoples Education Society while in Government service posted at Pune to prepare the ground to lead a movement towards the social change mission. Kanshiram in RPI experienced the decline of the Dalit movement in Maharashtra. Kanshiram believed that "The leaders (in RPI) had become opportunistic, greedy, and selfish, and the internal conflicts in the RPI had overshadowed its original objective... He was distressed that the land where Phule, Shahu Maharaj, and then Dr. Ambedkar had struggled for hundred-odd years did not even have social democracy... Ambedkar Jayanti, he found, was celebrated by the followers of Dr. Ambedkar but had turned into a festival and lost its mission."²³² Kanshiram asserted that he wanted to bring back the lost element of the mission in the remembrance of Ambedkar. RPI still has several fractions and opportunistic leadership that eventually became the ruling parties' stooges.²³³ Even among the fractions, it continued to have *Mahar* leadership. With no mission on its agenda, RPI remained a *Mahar* party and could never gain support from other sections of society. The question of mobilizing marginalized communities under one roof remained unanswered.

Dr. Ambedkar had once told in a conference held in Agra on March 18, 1956, "These people for whom I have struggled lifelong are now only concerned in filling up their stomachs."²³⁴ Nothing much has changed since then. Even in the present time though lakhs of people entered

²³² Narayan, Badri. (2014: 38). *Kanshiram: Leader of the Dalits*. New Delhi: Penguin.

²³³ Ramdas Athawale and his faction of RPI are in alliance with Bharatiya Janata Party, a right-wing party dominated by oppressor castes. Before allying with BJP, his party was with Congress, another party dominated by upper caste leadership.

²³⁴ Narayan, Badri. (2014: 43). *Kanshiram: Leader of the Dalits*. New Delhi: Penguin.

government service using opportunities created through the reservation, they hardly have contributed back to social cause for the betterment of their community. Kanshiram took Dr. Ambedkar's iconic slogan – 'Educate, Agitate, Organize' to his strength and started mobilizing educated Dalits working in government services across the country. It was an attempt to unite educated, employed people with resources to serve as the money, talent, and intellectual bank for the social cause. In 1971, he formed an SC/ST/OBC Minorities Communities Employees Association (SMCEA) in Pune. Later they renamed it the Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF). In 1978, he formally registered the organization with the slogan: 'Become educated, become consolidated, and struggle.'²³⁵ The word 'Backward' replaced the constitutional categories of marginalized communities, indicating the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes, to give a holistic and inclusive name to the organization. This does not mean all these communities have similar experiences of backwardness. They are not discriminated against equally. As far as the class of Minorities is concerned, it includes all those people from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes who have converted and become either Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jains, or Buddhists.²³⁶

BAMCEF, in their approach, believed that the educated class is the intellectual class. Kanshiram tapped the employee class to mobilize them to work towards eradicating the Brahmanical social system. He believed that employees were educated and had the financial source to support the movement. However, among the educated class, not everyone can be considered intellectual. BAMCEF believed that the educated class should possess three important characteristics to be considered an intellectual: first, the educated class must acquire a new vision

²³⁵ Narayan, Badri. (2014: 40). *Kanshiram: Leader of the Dalits*. New Delhi: Penguin.

²³⁶ BAMCEF Organization. (2022). <http://bamceforg.in/index.php/home-what-is-the-meaning-of-bamcef/> Accessed on 12th October 2021.

of life. Second, with this newly acquired vision, the educated class should analyze and understand its present life and status. Furthermore, if he feels that his life is inferior, he should consider changing it. The intellectual is the one who desires such a system in which no life will be inferior. Such an intellectual class dreams of a new society and a new system.²³⁷ Therefore, BAMCEF gives preference to organizing the educated classes as this class has the potential to become ideologically clear about what they want and can bring the desired change in the social system.

The mission of BAMCEF was to change the Brahmanical Social System based on the principle of inequality. The mission was called '*Vyavastha Parivartan*.' As communities are graded within the caste system, some are more backward, and some are less backward. In such circumstances, it is not easy to mobilize them for the same cause. However, what is common among them is that they all are oppressed by the Brahmanical social system based on caste. Since the organization's objective is to 'Change the System,' it is natural that only those victims of this Brahmanical Social System of Inequality can actively participate in the movement. Unusually, beneficiaries of the system that sustained it for their advantage will not participate and become active members of such a movement aimed at eradicating the same. Therefore, there is no logic in investing time and energy in organizing the System's beneficiaries in this movement of 'Change of System.' Therefore, only the victims of the Brahmanical Social System of caste are organized to change this system.

²³⁷ BAMCEF Organization. (2022). <http://bamceforg.in/index.php/home-what-is-the-meaning-of-bamcef/> Accessed on 12th October 2021.

Affective Symbols and Institutions of Anti-caste Movements in the Marathwada Region

Institutions play a vital role in building strong social movements as, through institutions, one can prepare active members to support and run the movements. The People's Education Society (PES) was one such visionary labor of Dr. Ambedkar. One of many institutions founded by Dr. Ambedkar, PES was founded in 1945. The number of schools, college campuses, and hostels built and run under PES covers many cities and regions of Maharashtra. It remained one of the most significant contributions of Dr. Ambedkar in the form of institution building.

Schools, colleges, and hostels run by PES have played an important role in producing an educated intellectual class among the marginalized community. Several scholars, activists, and civilians working in Maharashtra's anti-caste movement are from PES. They went on to make a big difference in society through their humanitarian work in the anti-caste movement. For instance, the Dalit Panther Movement, one of the most dynamic and radical social movements Maharashtra has ever seen- sprouted during the 1970s in the backyard of PES's student hostel in Wadala, Mumbai.²³⁸ Aurangabad has a legacy Buddhist heritage and is one of the important centers of the anti-caste movement and Buddhist heritage in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra. Keeping the city's importance in mind, Ambedkar founded a full-fledged campus named Nagasena Vana at Aurangabad. Nagasena Vana Campus comprises several colleges and hostels, such as Milind hostels, Milind College, Engineering, and law colleges run by PES.

²³⁸ See Pawar, J.V. (2017:29). *Dalit Panthers: An Authoritative History*. New Delhi: Marginalized Publication. Translated from Marathi by Rakshit Sonavane. J V Pawar mentioned about an apolitical Ambedkarite organization, Yuvak Aghadi, which came into existence before Dalit Panther and it was based at the Peoples Education Society run Siddharth Vihar Students' hostel at Wadala, Mumbai. As mentioned in the book the prominent youth leaders associated with Yuvak Aghadi included Bhagwan Waghmare (Zarekar), Raja Dhale, D.G. Jadhav, Arjun Dangle, Chintaman Jawle, Hiranman Bodhare, Vinayak Ranjane, Madhar Dhivar, Sudhakar Hadwalkar and Vasant Kamble.

The names given to institutions founded by Ambedkar are inspired by Buddhist nomenclature. Nagasena was a Buddhist monk and one of the most outstanding scholars and teachers of Buddhism of his time. King Milind is the best example of what should be the relationship between a teacher and a student. The relationship between Nagasena and Milind epitomizes the student-teacher relationship. Therefore, Ambedkar named the educational campus Nagasena Vana and colleges such as Milind College and Milind hostel in Aurangabad city. The increasing number of educated Dalits in general and Dalits in higher education from the Marathwada region, specifically the Milind college and Nagasena Vana campus, had a significant role in it. It created consciousness among the Dalits and marginalized communities, along with imparting educational qualifications.

Sham Tangade, a senior Ambedkarite leader and Activist from Ambejogai of Beed district, also studied at Milind college. While narrating his experience of staying on the Milind college campus says, "Milind college and the hostel on the Nagasen Vana campus at Aurangabad played a decisive role in creating the modern space for first-generation learners like me. It created the space for everyone to come together. The Nagasen Vana campus enabled students from different castes to experience friendship and togetherness for the first time."²³⁹ Aniket Aga (2019:1468)²⁴⁰ quoted Jeffrey (2010) to explain this modern phenomenon where "the youth, in particular men, from disadvantaged backgrounds access higher education, colleges are increasingly fraught spaces for the challenge to, and re-negotiation of caste boundaries. Relatively free from parental supervision, colleges allow students to meet, befriend, share food, and come in contact."

²³⁹ Interview with Sham Tangade on 9th May 2018.

²⁴⁰ Aga, Aniket (2019). The Marketing of corporate agrichemicals in Western India: Theorizing graded informality, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 7, pp. 1458-1476.

The students from diverse social backgrounds, both from marginalized and privileged castes, who made it to Milind college for further studies were made to think and reflect upon the village scenarios where they come. For instance, as discussed earlier, the *Mahar* and the *Matang* castes faced caste discrimination in a village, but they still used to have antipathy about each other. Milind college allowed all such students to come together and understand each other. The friendship of Shriranga Thorat and Sambhaji Jogdande of Kaij Taluka in Beed district is one such inspirational story. Both belonged to *Matang* and *Mahar* castes, respectively, but even in their late 60s, they are still friends and working together in the anti-caste movement. It was not restricted to students from marginalized backgrounds; other caste students also interacted with each other. Students also got an opportunity to engage with each other in the space free from parental supervision with fellow students from different social experiences and teachers.

Students unquestionably come with the baggage of learnings they had as part of their socialization in a caste society. To undo these learnings and impart new ideas of an equal society, teachers at the colleges played an important role. Teachers at Milind college used to invite various scholars and thinkers of the Ambedkarite movement. They used to organize their lectures and discussions on Ambedkarite literature, exposing students to complex issues like caste and deepening their understanding of various social problems. Every program organized at *Rangamandir*, a function hall in Milind College, used to start with *Trisaran Panchashil* and ends with the national anthem. Students across the communities from the Marathwada region used to come to Milind college. Many stayed at Milind college's hostel. People who were separated for generations on caste lines had minimal spaces where they could come together, forgetting their caste locations. Therefore, Milind college was essential in grooming many young students into the Ambedkarite thought process.

The Namantar movement (Name change movement) of Marathwada University to Babasaheb Ambedkar University, Aurangabad, was one of the crucial movements in the history of modern Maharashtra. It was not a hollow demand coming from marginalized communities to name the university after the name of Dr. Ambedkar. Marginalized communities were left outside the purview of educational institutions and were still marginalized and intimidated by the exclusionary atmosphere of educational institutions in India. The example of the Milind college and Nagasena Vana campus catered to the aspiration of Dalits to have more such educational institutions where students coming from marginalized identities do not feel alienated. They felt the need to have symbolic connections with modern institutions so that people from marginalized communities would not get intimidated by exclusionary higher education institutions dominated mainly by a few upper castes. Therefore, naming a University after Dr. Ambedkar, one of the highest learned individuals of his time, the constitution maker of India, and one of the most outstanding leaders and champions of human rights, was not an unreasonable demand.

Maharashtra State Govt. unanimously passed the resolution to change the name of 'Marathwada University' to Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar University in 1978. However, it was resisted and opposed furiously by the upper castes of the region and the state. Outbreaks of undeterred violence were unleashed on the marginalized communities for their assertion and demand for the university's name change. Atyachar Virodh Samiti (1979: 846-847) reports the carnage of violence as "the violence against Dalits took many forms: Killing of people, molestation and rape of Dalit women, burning of their houses and huts, pillaging their bustees, rendering them homeless,

shunting them out of villages, polluting drinking water wells, killing of their cattle, refusal to give them work, etc., and this continued for 67 days."²⁴¹

Ek Nath Awad (2018)²⁴² narrated in his autobiography that *Mahars* and *Matangs* lived in adjacent localities. However, *Mahar* households and the community were targeted during Namantar Movement. The upper caste villagers selectively burned down the houses belonging to the *Mahar* caste. Awad says upper-caste villagers were fine with the docile *Matang* community, but they never wanted rebellious *Mahars* around. Nevertheless, Namantar Movement also saw some *Matang* youth throwing themselves into the movement challenging this divisiveness. The upper caste villagers murdered Pochiram Kamble with no mercy and remorse for his active participation in the Ambedkarite movement. It was one of the crucial junctures in the Namantar Movement and ignited the community's fighting spirit.

The Namantar movement greatly impacted marginalized communities from the region that brought people out of their homes to participate in the struggle for social justice and other social movements, irrespective of their caste affiliations. Social activists and community leaders traveled extensively to reach out to remote villages and towns to attend the program and give speeches about the contribution of social revolutionaries like Ambedkar, Phule, Shahu, and others. Ambedkarite activists and leaders spoke about Bahujan history, the importance of education, and scientific temperament against superstitions spread by Brahminic forces. This has laid the

²⁴¹ Atyachar Virodh Samiti. (1979). The Marathwada Riots: A Report. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 14, No. 19, (May 12, 1979), pp. 845-852.

²⁴² See Awad, Ek Nath. (2018). *Strike a Blow to Change the World*, trans. Jerry Pinto. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Publication.

foundation of a strong base for the Ambedkarite movement in the Marathwada region in general and the Beed district in particular.

The older generation of Buddhist converts and the foundation of a non-*Mahar* activist missionary movement in the Marathwada Region

What has changed after conversion for the *Mahar* caste is the change in their self-consciousness. Even after conversion, villages, where most low castes reside, have remained caste republics and continued to be governed parallelly on caste relations. Though the *Mahar* caste rebelled and converted to Buddhism along with Ambedkar, they faced many challenges from upper-caste village communities. *Mahars* refused to perform their caste duties after conversion. For this, they faced social boycotts and violence from upper castes, they were publicly humiliated, and their properties were destroyed. However, even in such situations, *Mahars* stood their ground and did not compromise. They could sustain and survive this difficult time because of their perseverance and desire to come out of the oppressive society. Though they did not have many material sources to sustain the oppressive nature of the Indian village structure and economy, they had numerical strength. The *Mahar* is one of the most prominent castes in Maharashtra. Their existence is almost in every village became their strength. They had the support of each other in difficult times, such as the brutal violence they faced during the Namantar movement.

The social churning among *Mahars* had an impact on other communities as well. Owing to the pre-existing hostility and hatred among different castes, as *Mahars* accepted the path of Buddha, Buddha was also treated as untouchable by upper castes and other non-*Mahar* scheduled castes. In previous sections of this chapter, the hostility within scheduled castes and the non-acceptance of anti-caste ideology by non-*Mahar* castes have been discussed. The hostility and

hatred resulted in non-*Mahar* castes aligned with upper castes thinking they would not face the brutality of upper castes as the *Mahars* were facing for many of their rebellious acts, including the decision to convert to Buddhism. On the other hand, non-*Mahar* castes were happy; they now thought everything, including caste occupations *Mahars* left behind, belonged to them.²⁴³

Also, not all *Mahars* who converted to Buddhism could disassociate themselves from their past culture. One of the reasons was village economy kept a check on the mobility among converted Buddhists and kept them tied with other castes in the villages. The surrounding conditions also kept pulling them back to their past identities and cultural ties with others, leading them to be socially excluded in the cultural sphere of village society. This led to confusion about their Buddhist identity with that of *Mahar*. Non-*Mahar* castes also keep highlighting this confusing life of *Mahars* who converted to Buddhism and the reason for not considering conversion as the path to their emancipation. However, not on a large scale, the non-*Mahar* castes always had representation on an individual level. Few individuals were active in Buddhist conversion discourse, even at the time of Ambedkar.²⁴⁴

Before activist missionaries actively reached out to their respective communities to politicize them and started spreading Buddhism, few individuals in the Marathwada region dared to go against the majority of their community's wish and became Ambedkarites. The larger anti-caste movement had a grip on these individuals. They are also self-motivated leaders who have a different vision for themselves to follow to bring change in the communities they belong.

²⁴³ See Waghmore, Suryakant. (2013). *Civility against Caste: Dalit Politics and Citizenship in Western India*. New Delhi: Sage Publication.

²⁴⁴ See Kadam, Somnath (2020). *Ambedkari Chalvalitil Matang Samaj*. Mumbai: Lokvangmaya Grih.

These individuals were the foundation upon which the present discourse of Buddhist conversion stood. Therefore, before dealing with the organized efforts of activists as a missionary in the Marathwada region, we must see the individuals and their efforts in Buddhist discourse. These preceding journeys made this organized activist missionary movement possible as they were the leaders and activists who went against the community, became Ambedkarite, converted to Buddhism, and practiced anti-caste ideology in their daily lives.

Eknath Awad (Jija): From being a son of Potraj to an Ambedkarite leader who liberated thousands through Buddhism

Eknath Awad was born in the *Matang* family as the elder son of the Potraj.²⁴⁵ His journey started from being Potraj's son and continued to expand along with his struggle against caste and inequality. People fondly used to call him Jija. As per the tradition, Eknath Awad would have become Potraj if his mother had not intervened and sent him to school. Eknath Awad is the eldest son in his family; as per tradition, his father wanted him to be the Potraj. However, it did not happen because his mother and sister were stubborn. His mother, who was also Ambedkar's admirer, had decided to educate the child. The progress inclined her that the Mahar caste from neighboring villages had achieved. She believed that *Mahars* could study well, become employed, and subsequently live a better life because they followed Dr. Ambedkar and his advice of educating the next generation.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁵ Potraj is a religious tradition followed by ex-untouchable castes in Maharashtra. Dalits have their deities and priests, and the responsibility to look after the deities is carried out by the eldest son of the family, who has to take up the responsibility whether he likes it or not. He has to grow his hair and wear particular clothes.

²⁴⁶ See Awad, Eknath. (2018). *Strike a Blow to Change the World*, trans. Jerry pinto. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Publication.

It was entirely unexpected from a *Matang* woman who is also the wife of Potraj. However, as discussed earlier, some Matang leaders and activities during the time of Ambedkar stood with the anti-caste movement and influenced others. Awad's father was one of the silent supporters of the Ambedkarite movement who wished to see his son study like *Mahars* and progress in his life.²⁴⁷ So, Awad first went to a school in a nearby village called Kuppa and further up to Matric in another school from nearby Lavul village. From there, he went to Balbhim college at Beed. Awad's exposure to education, Ambedkarite literature, and Dalit movements at the time he grew up in Dukadegaon in the Beed district greatly impacted him. Awad's first-hand experience of caste and discrimination associated with this most oppressive social system and, in a later phase, his engagement with the Dalit Panther's movement and active participation in the Namantar movement motivated him to work for the downtrodden communities. His association with Kanshiram and Bahujan Samaj Party also plays a vital role in shaping his persona.

Awad had to face many challenges in his life. He used to wonder, nonetheless, of being educated, knowing rights, the functioning of the government system, and the law, he had to face many challenges, what must be the plight of marginalized communities in the villages of a neglected region like the Marathwada. The resentment against injustice was instilled in Awad naturally. Through the Manavi Hakka Abhiyan (Campaign for Human Rights)- an organization he founded in Marathwada, Awad encouraged and raised hundreds of activists. "He taught people to go to jail and also get beaten up," Ashok Palke said jokingly.²⁴⁸ Awad believed peace and order always complemented the upper castes and the privileged. Awad instead sees tension, unrest, and conflicts as a harbinger of change in a time of oppression. He believed that people need to confront

²⁴⁷ See Awad, Eknath. (2018). *Strike a Blow to Change the World*, trans. Jerry pinto. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Publication.

²⁴⁸ Interview with Ashok Palke on 9th May 2018.

the oppressor who likes to keep the oppressive order intact by maintaining peace in society. Oppressors never wish to disturb peace and order, which eventually works in their favor.

The peace seemed to symbolize a lack of unrest among the oppressed in the oppressive system. Therefore, for Awad, the act of people being beaten up and oppressors using force to maintain order in the caste society means there is unrest among the people. People are not heeding the brutal authority. People are rebelling against the mighty unjust power of oppressors, which they maintain under the veil of a peaceful society. In other words, his role was to signify the beginning of change. Even though Awad's approach was aggressive and radical, he did not allow himself to go beyond the law. This could only be possible because his entire journey was in the light of Ambedkar's thoughts, as he was influenced by Ambedkar's writings and his democratic approach.

In the same vein as conversion among ex-untouchable castes happened under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar, Awad also engaged himself in a movement to embrace Buddhism. In 2006, along with his followers and supporters belonging to the *Matang* and nomadic communities, he converted to Buddhism. Awad used to say that Buddhist Bhanteji (Buddhist monk) does not turn to *Matang* families. If they are not approaching people, how will people progress? How can India become Buddhist? Awad was always critical of the one-sided form of the Dhamma, or Buddhist movement, and the narrow approach of the Buddhist monks. He had never hidden behind the lame excuses for which Buddhist monks did not reach out to the Matang community. Awad was a self-motivated leader. He said:

"In 1978, I objected to naming my son Laxman. I named him Milind. Many went to learn at Milind college from Marathwada. I could not study at Milind College,

but I named my son Milind. Therefore, I have become a Buddhist before my conversion (Awad, 2018, p. 255-56).²⁴⁹

However, he took formal initiation as a Buddhist in 2006, keeping in mind that people would blame him as a hypocrite who speaks highly about Ambedkarite values and the language of social justice as an activist without discarding the root cause for the same- the Hindu religion. Even if he had not taken the Diksha of Buddhism, no one would have been able to take away Awad's contribution to the Ambedkarite movement and his struggle for equal rights, considering his overall thinking and movement. However, he was well aware of the politics of appropriation and the importance of formally converting to Buddhism. He wanted to lead with an example. Unless someone from the community sets an example, people do not get motivated and never do something courageous. Therefore, Awad's conversion was very much a symbol of courage and motivation for others.

Eknath Awad has impacted thousands of families, touched them with empathy, and brought stability to their lives. This man opposed the caste system throughout his life. Through his struggle, he changed the future of himself and his family and gave a new life to the thousands of people who supported and worked with him. He gave courage to the people suffering from the caste system's tyranny to reject it. He showed them the way and made their struggle successful by enduring the attacks of the oppressor castes. Eknath Awad performed this alchemy in the sixty-five years of his life before his journey ended prematurely on May 25, 2015. It is rare for an ordinary person to have achieved such an incredible feat in one life.

²⁴⁹ See Awad, Eknath. (2018). *Strike a Blow to Change the World*, trans. Jerry pinto. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Publication.

Chakravarti G.S. Dada Kamble: Crusader of Buddhist Mission in Maharashtra

Gangadhar Satwaji Kamble was born into a *Matang* family on 11 May 1963. He was fondly called G S Dada by his followers and supporters. Dada's village Sakanur is in the Nanded district of the Marathwada region of Maharashtra. He was educated till the 10th standard and had to work in a private company at the very early age of 17, owing to the poor conditions of his family. However, he never got settled in his job because he was always interested in community work. He moved from Jalana to Aurangabad, as Aurangabad is the place of vibrant anti-caste movements in the Marathwada region. While engaging in community work, he completed his high school with distance education and his BA from the Open University.

In 1993, G.S. Dada started working for Lahuji Sena,²⁵⁰ a *Matang* organization working to unite the community for social change. He started appealing to the people for unity under the red flag of the organization. During this time, he ran a magazine called *Lahu Shakti*. Dada used this platform to express and present his thoughts and ideas about a social movement.

The work was growing, but nothing concrete came from the organization's hard work in mobilizing the community. No conclusions were reached between 1993 and 2000. Dada reflected upon the activities they engaged in those seven years and their work to mobilize people. After a thorough analysis, he realized that they demonized the other castes to unite their caste. They had to speak hatefully about the caste on the other side. This leads him to change his path and join Dr. Ambedkar's path to salvation through Buddhism. Dada Says:

²⁵⁰ Lahuji was a revolutionary leader belonging to the Matang community. He was the mentor of many revolutionaries during the colonial period.

"Invoking hatred is underlined in the caste hierarchy. This work cannot be the work of Phule-Shahu-Ambedkar and their teachings. So, I decided to unite one caste with another (Matang community with Buddhists). For this connection, I took the blue flag, the slogan of Jay Bhim, and the Ambedkarite ideology with me. It was a new beginning from the year 2000 onwards. Due to this decision, all the people who have been with me since 1993 left me. I started sowing Ambedkar's thoughts, and people of my caste started opposing me, teasing me as 'Mahar's agent,' saying, 'his father is Mahar.' Some people would spit at me. However, I did not back down from the principles. The period from 2000 to 2004 was challenging. During this difficult time, the Buddhist community gave me mental support, financial help, and protection. I started the Tathagat Magazine in 2004, and through the magazine, I started spreading Ambedkar's ideas from house to house. Today, the magazine reaches about 2500 houses. I intend to reach 100,000 Matang households across Maharashtra. I believe in myself and Ambedkarite ideology and Ambedkar's ideology on my side; with proper planning, we can make a big difference."²⁵¹

While he was active in social movements, Dada took Dhamma Deeksha (Buddhist initiation) in 2006. After the Dhamma Deeksha, Dada started a full-time mission to spread Dhamma all over Maharashtra, primarily among non-Mahar communities. After his conversion to Buddhism, till his last breath, Dada initiated about 7000 followers from the Matang community alone into Buddhism. He used the platform of *Tathagata* magazine to reach out to more people, politicize the masses, and make them a conscious community. Through his hard work, the

²⁵¹ Interview with G.S. Dada Kamble on 26th April 2018.

magazine reached every district in Maharashtra. Dada further expanded his work on the Dhamma Deeksha program by founding the "*Satyashodhak Samaj Mahasangh*." "*Chalo Buddha Ki Aur*" (Let us Go Towards Buddha) was his slogan to run the mission work of spreading Buddhism in Maharashtra.

Dada sacrificed his personal life and family pleasure for the movement. What might be the motivation for such sacrifices? He was only concerned about making the marginalized community prosperous. For that, Dada constantly used to think about how to take the community out of the cycle of superstition. Though he gave importance to his community, he never restricted his efforts to the *Matang* community only. Other followers of the de-notified communities and OBC castes in Maharashtra can be seen with him at the places where he initiated Dhamma. Dada persuaded people to convert to Buddhism till his last breath on March 27, 2019.

Hanumant Upare (Kaka): Ambedkarite OBC Leader

Smritishesh Hanumant Upare is fondly called "Kaka" by his admirers and followers. Kaka was born in a humble family of the Bhavasar caste belonging to the OBC²⁵² community in a small village in Maharashtra. Rarely has anyone in recent times received so much love as Kaka has received from the people of the Phule-Ambedkarite movement in Maharashtra. This magic was done by the unprecedented and historic stand he took in the conversion campaign and by leading the OBC community to the Phule-Ambedkarite movement. People have loved him dearly for his courageous decision to follow the path of Dr. Ambedkar.

²⁵² The Other Backward Class is an official category used by the Government of India to classify castes those are educationally and economically disadvantaged given their social status in the caste hierarchy.

In 1956, Dr. Ambedkar was initiated into Buddhism with millions of followers. It was one of the most significant cultural events in modern India. In the fifty years that followed, no such incident took place except on a personal level. On the golden jubilee of Babasaheb's conversion in 2006, many sections of the society started coming forward to convert to Buddhism, and hundreds of thousands of people started converting. In the same year, Laxman Mane, his colleagues, and his followers gave the first blow to Hinduism after Dr. Ambedkar. Dalits, Adivasis, and De-notified and Nomadic tribes always remained at the periphery of the Hindu religion. They are beyond all Chaturvarnas. Hinduism has always exploited and discriminated against them. Hinduism profited from exploiting the Shudra community, i.e., the OBC community, which is more than 52% of the country's population. Therefore, the OBC community is the base of Hinduism. Upare Kaka believed that OBCs not only sustained the discriminatory society but also adopted and cherished the inhuman culture of Hinduism, proudly calling themselves Hindu. If one has to destroy the base of Hinduism, the real push must be given to the OBC community. That is what Hanumant Upare Kaka has done.

Upare Kaka had chosen the difficult path of urging those who took pride in following this unjust religion to rise. Upare Kaka believed that if the OBC base of Hinduism is removed, the structure of the Vedic religion, which imposes racist culture on the Indian society under the word "Hindu," will undoubtedly collapse. Therefore, he tried to awaken and enlighten the OBC, the Shudra community, about Hinduism's barbarity and brutal nature. Dr. Ambedkar showed the fighting spirit in helpless masses, and Upare Kaka drew inspiration from it and took on the mission of spreading such a fighting spirit amongst OBCs. That is why the people of the Phule-Ambedkarite movement, who are prudent in their thought and loyalty, accepted Upare Kaka as their own.

Upare Kaka had been continuously working in the community for forty-one years. The Phule-Ambedkarite movement has always remained his focus. During this time, he worked on the issues of OBCs. He was also the State President of the Bharipa-Bahujan Mahasangh,²⁵³ which he attempted to spread all over Maharashtra. Through these journeys, he gained much experience in the movement, noticing its shortcomings and OBC issues in particular, and searched for a radical solution to the lifelong misery of OBCs. At one stage in this search, he came across the path of Buddha shown by Dr. Ambedkar and decided to convert to Buddhism.²⁵⁴

Considering his decision to convert, he felt the necessity to form the *Satyashodhak OBC Parishad* to reach out to the masses and convince them to convert to Buddhism. During this time, he traveled thousands of kilometers and reached out to the remotest corners of the state. He also started magazines and wrote books to express his ideas and reach a larger population.²⁵⁵ Upare Kaka calls this conversion the real *gharvapasi* or returning home. Upare Kaka believes that:

*All the OBCs in India used to be Buddhists in the past, and we forgot our identity and started thinking of ourselves as Hindus. However, now that we know who we are, we must return to our original religion, Buddhism.*²⁵⁶

Upare Kaka was affectionate and kind in his approach while pursuing people to convert, which helped the movement bring new people closer to each other. Showering affection on them,

²⁵³ The Bharipa Bahujan Mahasangh (BBM) is a political party founded by Adv Prakash Ambedkar, grandson of Dr Ambedkar, on 4th July 1994. The complete name of the party is Bharatiya Republican Paksha - Bahujan Mahasangh. The party has its roots in the Republican Party of India and Scheduled Castes Federation led by B. R. Ambedkar. BBM was primarily based in Maharashtra. In 2019, BBM merged into the Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi, new political party founded by Adv Prakash Ambedkar along with others.

²⁵⁴ Interview with Sandip Upare at his residence in Beed town on 6th April 2018.

²⁵⁵ Hanumant Upare wrote extensively in Marathi. The primary object was to reach the OBC community, therefore, the subjects of his books revolved around OBC issues. Books such as *Me OBC Bolatoy*; *OBC la Paryay Dharmantar*; *OBC Jat Sodato Tevha* etc.

²⁵⁶ Interview with Sandip Upare at his residence in Beed town on 6th April 2018.

convincing them, explaining to them the Phule-Ambedkarite ideology, and illustrating that there is no alternative but to follow the path of the Buddha was his way of working with people. Upare Kaka believed that accepting Ambedkarism without Buddhist conversion is incomplete. To become a complete Ambedkarite, one must convert to Buddhism. On March 19, 2015, Kaka breathed last. This day is observed as Memorial Day by his followers every year. Kaka sowed the seed of the glorious dream he had seen and pursued throughout his life. In this pursuit, he motivated and influenced hundreds of followers with love and affection. Nevertheless, when that golden moment of fulfilling his dream was just a year-and-a-half away from its culmination, he passed away: his dream of converting to Buddhism was fulfilled by his family and followers on November 25, 2016.

Aatmaram Chandane: A journey from the district President of Workers Front of RSS to a zealous Ambedkarite leader

Aatmaram Chandane, who hails from the *Matang* community, worked in an Indian Post Service. In his initial days, he was associated with Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)- a right-wing Hindu organization based on Hindutva ideology, formed and led by the oppressor caste. RSS branch of Beed district appointed Aatmaram Chandane as district president of its worker's wing in Beed. He was influenced by RSS ideology and was also a victim of anti-*Mahar* sentiments among the *Matang* community. However, Kanshirams mission of organizing Dalit employees from the government sector reached out to Mr. Chandane. Kanshiram and his movement in Maharashtra in general and Marathwada in specific left a significant impact on government employees from marginalized communities. BAMCEF's strategy of mobilizing government employees from marginalized communities attracted many volunteers, members, and leaders.

The flagbearers of Kanshiram's mission within the Postal Service department at Beed kept engaging with Mr. Chandane to make him understand that he was in the wrong place and should be using his time, energy, and resources for the liberation of his community. Mr. Chandane was not a blind follower and had an interest in reading and reflecting upon what he reads and learning from it. He eventually started withdrawing from RSS and started taking part in BAMCEF activities. Because of BAMCEF and Ambedkarite employees working in the Indian Post department, Mr. Aatmaram Chandane encountered the Kanshiram's movement and Dalit literature. During his close interactions with his Ambedkarite colleagues, he got inspired, and since then, he has lived his life for the cause of Ambedkarism.

Even after Kanshiram shifted his focus from organizing government employees to politically mobilizing marginalized communities to launch a political front, the Bahujan Samaj Party, however, Ambedkarite employees, kept the BAMCEF activities functional. They kept working at Post Office in the Beed district. They together started the *Mahapurush Pratishthan* following the vision of BAMCEF. *Mahapurush Prathishthan* began organizing programs to strengthen and amplify the thoughts and work of social revolutionaries who worked for humanitarian causes in general and marginalized communities in particular. Pratishthan organized lectures of well-known Ambedkarite thinkers, progressive social activists, and academicians every month at Beed.

The first such lecture was organized under *Mahapurush Pratishthan* by Mr. M M Deshmukh- an academician, writer, and well-known thinker in the progressive circle in Maharashtra. The lecture venue was Samata School, a school run by RSS ideologues in Beed. RSS protested against this move of *Mahapurush Pratishthan*. However, members of *Pratishthan* did not tread back and went ahead with the plan, organized his talk, and made it a success. Mr.

Deshmukh is *Maratha* by caste. He and other Maratha intellectuals have started critically engaging with Bahujan history and problematizing Brahmanical narration of history. Through that, they spread awareness among the *Maratha* upper-caste community about the false narration of Brahmanical history.

Aatmaram Chandane was convinced that one could change people's minds through continuous engagement and dialogue. He was an example of how constant engagement can transform people from being an RSS member to Ambedkarite ideologue and progressive social activists. BAMCEF and the leadership of Kanshiram have a significant impact on people from oppressed castes and marginalized communities. It is the reason for the transformation of Hindu marginalized communities as Ambedkarite Bahujan masses. It motivated Aatmaram Chandane to keep himself engaged with people irrespective of their ideological orientation. Independent social movement and organic leadership from oppressed castes for social change are some of the crucial strategies of Kanshiram.

As A. R. Akela (2007:115) quoted Kanshiram, "It is imperative to produce leadership among these (marginalized) castes. The other parties produce only stooges, but we will produce leaders, and the day that leadership is produced, the Dalits will be truly liberated."²⁵⁷ Kanshiram had a vision for producing community leaders among the marginalized section of society to represent and bring change to the respective communities and liberate them. Mr. Aatmaram Chandane was one of such leaders coming from the Matang community. He was one of the crucial leaders in the Marathwada region.

²⁵⁷ Quoted in Narayan, Badri. (2016: 36). *Kanshiram: Leader of the Dalits*. New Delhi: Penguin.

Aatmaram Chandane died in the year 2011, leaving behind a strong legacy. His contribution to the Ambedkarite movement and politics remains inspirational to his followers and supporters. His legacy of working with marginalized communities in general and the *Matang* community in specific goes along with the vision set for the social change desired by the Bahujan icons. He firmly believed in Ambedkar's movement, followed the Kanshiram, and carried their legacy through various means and models. His mission is carried forward by his supporters and followers under his son Ajinkya Chandane in the Marathwada region. The initiatives and contributions of Aatmaram Chandane, such as the Democratic Party of India that he co-founded, remained one of his most significant contributions to the Ambedkarite movement in Beed.

Conclusion

This chapter dealt with the post-Ambedkar development of the Ambedkarite anti-caste movement in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra. Most academic narratives on Buddhist conversion in Maharashtra revolved around *Mahar's* assertion as *Mahars* were the first and largest community to convert to Buddhism. As Zelliott (1992:222)²⁵⁸ argued, "unlike any other mass conversion in history, this new religious movement was almost completely on its own." The contemporary Buddhist conversion movement in India, in general, emerged not from an organized top-down missionary intervention. Therefore, it also lacked the pre-existing organizational structure and leadership. It also did not get the support of existing religious establishments and structures. The new converts lack the resources. There was always a dearth of trained Bhikkus in Maharashtra.

²⁵⁸ Zelliott, Eleanor. (1992:222). *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*. New Delhi: Manohar Publication.

To fill this gap, Dr. Ambedkar suggested training lay Buddhists as preachers who could take care of the immediate needs of the new converts at the local level.²⁵⁹ The followers of Dr. Ambedkar took up this responsibility, became lay preachers, and worked as activist missionaries. Adv Eknath Awad, G.S. Dada Kamble, and Hanumant Upare, the new generation of social activists and leaders in the Marathwada region, made efforts to organize the community for social change. They put a united fight against Brahmanism and pushed the anti-caste agenda for the non-Brahmins to uplift themselves from caste oppression.

These leaders showed the courage that Dr. Ambedkar expected from his followers to tell the Hindus that what was wrong with them was their religion. Eventually, Adv Awad and GS Dada Kamble converted to Buddhism. Hanumant Upare Kaka passed away before the proposed date of his conversion to Buddhism. Unfortunately, all of them are not alive today. Nevertheless, they are still relevant through the contribution they made in their lifetime. Their followers are motivated enough to carry forward the unfinished work of their respective leaders and follow the path of Ambedkarism toward Buddhism. While reaching out to the masses and introducing them to the ideology of Ambedkarism and taking them to Buddhism, the activist missionary mostly takes the non-party political approach to politicize individuals and communities.²⁶⁰

Given the rigid social structure and animosities between communities within a caste-based social system, bringing people together for social change is a stiff task. These activists and leaders of the community belonging to non-*Mahar* castes took an active part in politicizing the communities. These activities were prominently happening amongst the non-*Mahar* communities

²⁵⁹ B R Ambedkar, *Buddhist Movement in India: A Blue Print*. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part III. (New Delhi: Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, 2020), 508.

²⁶⁰ See Waghmore, Suryakant. (2013:27). *Civility against Caste: Dalit Politics and Citizenship in Western India*. New Delhi: Sage Publication.

of the Marathwada region of Maharashtra. Therefore, the next chapter will address the activism they all engaged with around Ambedkarism as an ideology. It will also address the various strategies adopted by the activists to convince their respective communities for religious conversion to Buddhism.

Chapter Four

Activist Missionary: Strengthening the roots of Buddhism amongst non-*Mahar* communities in the Marathwada region

"I believe my people will sacrifice everything to establish Buddhism
in India."

(Ambedkar, 2013: 449)²⁶¹

Introduction:

The previous chapter discussed the political mobilization of marginalized communities, which gave rise to the non-*Mahar* leadership in the process of becoming Ambedkarite and further taking the ideology of Ambedkarism to their respective communities in various ways. Marathwada, as the region, has seen several events and movements like BAMCEF and Namantar Movement, and violence inflicted upon the Dalit community post-Namantar event significantly impacts the development of anti-caste leadership in the region. Educational institutions like Milind college and the hostel run by the Peoples Education Society founded by Dr. Ambedkar also significantly impacted the anti-caste movement in the Marathwada region. This chapter has briefly described the impact of such movements and institutions on developing an anti-caste leadership and these leaders' journey to becoming Ambedkarites in the Marathwada region.

²⁶¹ Ambedkar, B.R. (2013:449). *I believe, my people will sacrifice everything to establish Buddhism in India*, In Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part I.

This chapter has elaborately discussed the organized efforts of politicized activists and leaders from non-*Mahar* communities in propagating anti-caste thoughts and began to mobilize people from their community with the clear agenda of convincing them of the Buddhist conversion in the Marathwada region. Every caste has reasons for taking conversion as a form of protest or even not to ally with the anti-caste movement, stay away from Buddhist conversion discourse, and continue to remain in Hinduism. It has, therefore, methodologically needs to be looked at from the perspective of relativism. So, the present chapter explores the different approaches of distinct caste groups from diverse social backgrounds and narrates their 'experience' of conversion. Therefore, this chapter explores the process of politically socializing communities and finally converting to Buddhism. I will also discuss conversion as a missionary activity in Buddhism in recent times of the Buddhist conversion movement in Maharashtra.

It has further mapped the unique process of the activist missionary in reaching out to the masses, introducing them to the ideology of Ambedkarism, and taking them to Buddhism in the following subheadings of this chapter. Mostly the activist missionary takes the non-party political churning approach in the region to politicize individuals and communities.²⁶² It was a cumulative effect and result of self-motivated leadership coming from marginalized sections of society. These socio-political and religious movements were led by charismatic leaders who brought Ambedkarite vision and anti-caste politics to the masses.

²⁶² See Waghmore, Suryakant. (2013:27). *Civility against Caste: Dalit Politics and Citizenship in Western India*, New Delhi: Sage Publication.

Profile of the respondents:

The demographic details of the respondents are shown in table 4.1. Eighty-seven respondents who participated in this research hailed from the Beed district of the Marathwada region of Maharashtra.

Sr No	Social Background	Details of Respondents		
		Male	Female	Total
1	SC	43 (49.4%)	15 (17.2%)	58 (66.6%)
2	ST	7 (8%)	3 (3.4%)	10 (11.4%)
3	OBC	11 (12.6%)	8 (9.1%)	19 (21.8%)
4	Total	61 (70.1%)	26 (29.8%)	87 (100%)

Table 4.1 Details of the respondents

It is evident from the statistics in table 4.1 that the majority of converts (66%) come from the SC category—followed by OBC (21%) and ST (11%). It shows that SC castes are still dominating in Buddhist conversion movement. Buddhism is treated as the religion of ex-untouchable castes, and SC castes continued to dominate in terms of conversion. It is also because the castes ranked higher in the caste hierarchy are less interested in conversion. The reason for the same is the graded inequality in the caste hierarchy and the degree of oppression they face, as the majority of converts give caste oppression as the reason for their decision to convert from Hinduism. The experience of caste oppression is lesser for the castes ranked higher in order and harsher for castes lower in order. Therefore, we find more Buddhist converts belonging to the SC category.

The OBC castes stand higher in the caste hierarchy than SCs and STs. Historically OBC castes never faced untouchability. They were always part of the Hindu social order and played a

crucial role in the village economy. The close comparative ties with higher castes and better social conditions of OBC than the SCs and STs have a grip on OBC participation in the conversion movement. It is a stiff task for activists to convince OBCs to convert.

In the case of indigenous people who are also known as Tribes or Adivasis and constitutionally categorized as Scheduled Tribes (ST), their representation in Buddhist conversion is the lowest compared to the other two categories. Their lower share in conversion resulted from their location in a caste society. STs are formally not part of the caste order. Therefore, they technically are not directly associated or connected with caste. Result of this, their oppression is not directly related to a caste system. Laxman Mane, a leader, writer, and thinker belonging to De-notified tribes, said that,

*"Tribals never followed Hinduism, so there is no question of relinquishing it. However, all these years, we suffered at the hands of ruling Hindus, and now we want to live as human beings. Buddhism will give us a sense of belonging."*²⁶³

They reclaim their histories, linking their customary practices to Buddhist traditions. They claim Buddhism as their past identity, which forms an integral part of the religious movement among indigenous communities in Maharashtra. Apart from the historic oppressive caste locations of the communities, the emergence of autonomous and organic leadership among SC castes (discussed in the third chapter), I argue, forms the basis of more turnout from SC castes in the conversion movement. The reasons for the Buddhist conversion of different social groups have been addressed under separate headings.

²⁶³ Mane, Laxman. (2020). Facebook Live video of Laxman Mane streamed on *Matang, Charmakar and OBC Chalo Buddha ki Aur* Facebook page. <https://www.facebook.com/100003182016684/videos/3092112174238153/> Accessed on 20th June 2020.

Locating conversion experience in urban vs. rural settings

Dr. Ambedkar has argued that the only way to end the social isolation of marginalized castes in India is to get themselves incorporated into another community that is free from the spirit of Caste (Ambedkar, 2016, p. 413-414).²⁶⁴ The proposition that to end their social isolation, the untouchables must forge kinship ties with another community that does not recognize caste is easy to make. Waghmore (2019:3)²⁶⁵ argued that rural life in India is deeply fragmented on caste lines and simultaneously regulated through inter and intra-caste intimacy. The caste system in villages creates an environment that is antithetical to the ideals of cosmopolitanism and genuine civility.

On the other hand, Waghmore (2019:3)²⁶⁶ calls cities "prime movers of modernity and are considered favorable spaces for dissolving status-based identities and hierarchies." Therefore, there is the possibility of dialogue and openness among the communities to achieve a more significant public reach. Waghmore (2019:3) further argues, and I quote him, "Historically, urban spaces also advance individual liberty and an associational culture conducive to 'civil' society. Due to their dynamic density, urban spaces are said to produce organic solidarity, taking individuals beyond the solidarities of kinship ties."

Therefore, as suggested by Ambedkar, the way to end the isolation of marginalized communities can be achieved in the cities as city life is seen as an ideal space for establishing kinships beyond castes or at least can create opportunities to frame solidarities beyond family and kinship bonds. Dr. Ambedkar may have advocated for ex-untouchables to move to the metropolis since caste posed a severe threat to the possibility of cosmopolitanism and civility in rural life.

²⁶⁴ Ambedkar, B.R. (2016:413-14). Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol.5.

²⁶⁵ Waghmore, Suryakant. (2019:3). Community, not Humanity: Caste Associations and Hindu Cosmopolitanism in Contemporary Mumbai. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*. Vol. 42, Issue 2.

²⁶⁶ Waghmore, Suryakant. (2019:3-4). Community, not Humanity: Caste Associations and Hindu Cosmopolitanism in Contemporary Mumbai. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*. Vol. 42, Issue 2.

Cities serve as places where subalterns can escape the oppressive nature of the rural social structure (Waghmore, 2019:3).²⁶⁷

Sr No	Social Background	Details of Respondents		
		Peri/Urban	Rural	Total
1	SC	46 (52.8%)	12 (13.8%)	58 (66.6%)
2	ST	8 (9.1%)	2 (2.3%)	10 (11.4%)
3	OBC	15 (17.2%)	4 (4.6%)	19 (21.8%)
4	Total	69 (79.3%)	18 (20.7%)	87 (100%)

Table 4.2: Distribution of Respondents in Peri-urban and Rural Categories.

Most respondents who have taken a religious conversion path for their liberation come from Peri/urban settings. The details of the distribution of respondents based on their location as Peri/urban or rural are given in table 4.2. Waghmore (2019)²⁶⁸ argues that urban spaces offer better avenues to cross the orthodox caste barriers, which reflects in conversion among non-*Mahar* communities to Buddhism. Almost 80% of respondents are from peri/urban localities. However, almost all the respondents originally hail from villages/ rural backgrounds. Though most of the respondents got the opportunity to migrate from villages to urban localities and have their permanent addresses in urban/peri-urban localities, they still maintain ties with their natives. For those who got stuck in the villages, these urban migrant communities maintain political, social, economic, ideological, and spiritual linkages.

²⁶⁷ Waghmore, Suryakant. (2019). Community, not Humanity: Caste Associations and Hindu Cosmopolitanism in Contemporary Mumbai. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*. Vol. 42, Issue 2.

²⁶⁸ Ibid

In the case of *Satyashodhak Students Federation* (SSF), a student's wing of *Satyashodhak Samaj Mahasangha* (SSM) founded by G.S. Dada Kamble, they envisioned sending the youth from villages to urban localities for higher education. SSM believed that youth in the village remain uninformed of the anti-caste history and the movement as most activities keep happening in urban pockets. Therefore, through SSF, the SSM aimed at sending students to Aurangabad for further studies. Aurangabad is a major city in the Marathwada region and a significant center for the Ambedkarite movement. As discussed earlier in the thesis, the People's Education Society, founded by Dr. Ambedkar, is active in the region and has colleges, including Milind College at Nagsenvan Campus in Aurangabad.

G S Dada Kamble also believed that if the students spend their early years on the Nagsenvan campus, they become conscious of their rights and responsibilities and become active in social movements. Therefore, the SSF prioritizes students from rural backgrounds to support them in every manner. They run a helpdesk for admission, help students find accommodation, and help them generate funds for admission and other expenses in case students come from economically weaker families. It is one example of how urban migrants from the community are maintaining ties with rural communities.

Educational Background and status of Employment of the Respondents:

Dr. Ambedkar revived Buddhism in Maharashtra. At the same time, Ambedkar interpreted Buddhist teachings in a certain way to suit issues associated with caste and inequalities, which are contemporary to the present time. Therefore, the revival of Buddhism has played a vital role in shaping the ideas of these newly Buddhist converts through its re-imagination. Similarly, in the process of Buddhist revival in the post-Ambedkar religious conversion movement, Dalits

converted to Buddhism also changed the Buddhist discourse and traditions. It can be better explained by how the Buddhist community in Maharashtra has made progress on various fronts, including educational, employment, political and social status. Sukhdev Thorat demonstrated through his research that Dalits who converted to Buddhism are doing better in educational aspects than their counterparts from the Hindu religion. It is also one of the significant things one could notice about the dialectics of Buddhism, as referred to by Qin (2000:11).²⁶⁹

The Dialectics of Buddhism making marginalized communities and marginalized communities making Buddhism can be observed in the case of new Buddhist coming from non-*Mahar* castes. In the initial time, if not *Mahar's* conversion to Buddhism that attracted other non-*Mahar* castes, *Mahar's* progress in education and government services and, by default, their economic progress fascinated many.

Shriranga Thorat, one of the oldest non-*Mahar* Ambedkarite from Beed, narrated how he became Buddhist. Shriranga Thorat is from Mang Vadagaon village of Kej Taluka in Beed District. Before his conversion to Buddhism, he belonged to the *Matang* caste. Though he was working with the revenue department of the Maharashtra state as *Talathi*- a village-level revenue officer, he was active in the socio-political and religious movements. Shriranga Thorat says,

"Considering most of the young boys and girls from my community who dropped out from school, my parents understood the importance of education and decided to send me to Milind College in Aurangabad for further studies after my 10th

²⁶⁹ Qin, Wen-jie (2000). Unpublished thesis titled *'The Buddhist Revival in Post-Mao China: Women Reconstruct Buddhism on Mt. Emei'*, submitted to Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

*standard around the year 1969. It was the turning point of my life that gave me lots of exposure and confidence."*²⁷⁰

Shriranga Thorat did not stop there. He continued his mission, traveled in his locality, and met people to deepen his understanding of the issues and problems people face. Lack of education and the enormous resources of the community going into organizing religious rituals were the significant issues he figured out through his engagement with the community. To address these issues, he, along with his friends and colleagues, started talking to his community people. First of all, he started to spread awareness among the community. He used to argue with people saying money going into religious rituals will not change our fate. However, money going into education and the library will undoubtedly help us, as Ambedkar proved with his scholarship and hard work. He started collecting old textbooks and redistributing them to students as most marginalized students lack any support for education. Later with the money he collected from the people, the village's youth started a library named after Anna Bhau Sathe, which is still functional in the village.

The dialectics of Buddhism-making communities and communities making Buddhism is also seen in the respondents I interacted with. Almost all the respondents here are educated, and their minimum qualification is graduation. Twelve participants have a master's degree, and two have done their MPhil. One participant is a Ph.D. holder. Exceptionally few respondents are illiterate. Primarily, two women participants have not attended school. However, though they are not formally literate, we cannot call them illiterate as they have learned to read and write informally on their own with the help of their family members. The educational background of the respondents

²⁷⁰ Interview with Shriranga Thorat on 8th May 2018.

is connected with their occupational background of the respondents. Since all of them are employed, they work in different sectors, such as teachers, professors, doctors, engineers, nurses, and government employees at different levels, such as peons, clerks, and officers. Some are entrepreneurs, and some work in the private sector in NGOs and private companies. I have also met full-time social activists, community leaders, daily wage workers, and homemakers.

Change through Education: Case of Dr. Hamraj Uike

Dr. Hamraj Uike hails from the Kinvat village of the Nanded district of Maharashtra. The district falls under the Marathwada region, one of the most backward regions of the state, and is also a Naxal-prone area. Till his SSC, he studied at Adivasi Ashram School in his village. After SSC, he went to Taluka Headquarters, completed his HSC, and graduated. He went to Aurangabad for further studies and did his post-graduation and Ph.D. in Marathi Literature from Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University (BAMU), Aurangabad. He is working as an Assistant Professor of Marathi at Beed. It is the brief CV of a prominent scholar, poet, activist, and community leader who is active in the anti-caste movement in the region.

In most cases, the region's backwardness and lack of resources push people from the village to look for livelihood on a priority basis. Education and assertion of rights remain secondary. However, in the case of Dr. Hamraj, he defeated all the hurdles that could divert him from pursuing higher education. There are many reasons why he could able to do that. In his own words, Dr. Hamraj says,

"I hail from the tribal community, and my village falls under one of the backward regions of Maharashtra. The socio-economic condition of the region is very abject. People toil hard to get a livelihood daily; hence, it remains their priority.

*Therefore, most people are still illiterate and trapped in exploitative social systems like the Caste in India. People were far-flung from taking cognizance of self-existence and their rights."*²⁷¹

Dr. Hamraj was one among them when until he left his village and came to Taluka place to pursue BA. He met one of the best teachers at the college where he studied. His teacher Mr. Ramprasad Taur was a committed teacher. Leaving behind urban life, Mr. Taur preferred to come to the rural and backward regions like Kinvat. Dr. Hamraj never gets tired of praising his teacher. He continued to talk about his teacher, saying,

*"He (Mr. Taur) wanted to work among people. We (students) were fortunate to have him as a teacher. He used to participate in ongoing anti-caste social movements and had taken an active part in Namantar Movement. He used to talk about various social movements in his classes. He motivated me to go to Aurangabad to study at BAMU for MA and Ph.D. He introduced me to the university's professors from the Marathi literature department. He gave direction to my life by introducing me to anti-caste literature, which impacted my life choices immensely."*²⁷²

As mentioned previously, Kanshiram talked about educated people and their role in social movement, and the educated class is the one who can bring change in an oppressive social system. Dr. Hamraj is an example, as he believes that the 'right' education can show the way out for marginalized people from oppression. When I say education, it does not only mean textbook

²⁷¹ Interview with Dr. Hamraj Uike at his residence in Beed town on 11th April 2018.

²⁷² Interview with Dr. Hamraj Uike at his residence in Beed town on 11th April 2018.

literacy. The education he talked about is the one that creates empathy for those who are suffering and pushes them to work for their emancipation. Dr. Hamraj got such kind of education from his teachers at various levels. However, his exposure to the anti-caste texts, students' movement, teachers, and lifeworld in and around the University during his studies at the BAMU greatly impacted Dr. Hamraj. He credits the vibrant Ambedkarite students' movement on the BAMU campus. Student activists, leaders, and their activities taught him many things. Namantar Movement in Marathwada kept the fire alive amongst *Ambedkarvadi Samaj* (Ambedkarite community) and sustained the continuous flow in the formation of the Ambedkarite cadre in the Marathwada region.

Buddhist by Ritualistic Conversion or by Spiritual Conversion:

Buddhism and Ambedkarism are thoughts and ideas that need to be propagated and learned by everyone with self-effort. No one is born with conceptual clarity about Buddha and his teachings. Everyone has to learn it in the process. The non-Mahar conversion movement has this allegation about *Mahar* converts that people who have converted years before are also not clear about Buddha's thoughts and principles. So, they fail to transfer those thoughts and teachings of Buddhism to the next generation. We do not have that process in place. Unlike Hinduism, Buddhism does not believe in born identity. One should not claim themselves as Buddhist just because they are born into Buddhist parents or family. Otherwise, there will be no difference between Hinduism and Buddhism. People must earn the religious status of being Buddhist through ritualistic conversion and continuous learning and practicing daily.

Even among the non-*Mahar* Buddhist conversion movement, they have two different opinions on the purpose of ritualistic conversion and conversion through spirituality. The

campaign of '*Chalo Buddha ki Aur*'- Let us Go to Buddha, was led by Eknath Awad and Aatmaram Chandane together amongst the *Matangs* of Beed district. *Matangs* were introduced to Buddha in this movement and asked to convert to Buddhism. Ajinkya Chandane, current state president of the Democratic Party of India and son of Aatmaram Chandane, witnessed that movement as he has closely seen his father and Eknath Awad working together for conversion to Buddhism in the Beed district. He opined that *Matangs* were not ready for such conversion. Aatmaram Chandane, his father, firmly believed in the need for conversion and was willing to convert. However, he was also of the opinion that priority must be given to the political socialization of the community and later go for conversion. At the same time, Eknath Awad believed they should lead the community by example.

Aatmaram Chandane thought one could lead a life as a Buddhist in day-to-day practice and set an example for others to follow. Directly going for conversion rituals puts tremendous pressure on individuals as it involves abandoning their previous faith and giving up on deities. He believed one could live as a Buddhist by practicing it daily, even before conversion. Once the masses started to adopt the Buddhist way of life, they could go for conversion. Ajinkya Chandane gave examples of how some *Mahars* still follow Hindu rituals even after conversion to Buddhism. He also spoke about some of the *Matangs* who got converted along with Eknath Awad and returned to their everyday Hindu routine life. Few *Matang* families have undergone conversion rituals even twice.

Ajinkya Chandane, therefore, believed in making ground for the conversion and then converting to Buddhism to avoid the awkwardness of falling back to Hindu traditions even after Buddhist conversion. This way, people disrespect the anti-caste ideology of Ambedkar and Buddha's principles. He further says, "We have not converted to Buddhism in a formal, ritualistic way, but we have followed Buddhist rituals in our life. Be it my uncle's wedding, my father's death

rituals, my sister's wedding, and my wedding were performed as per Buddhist rituals."²⁷³ Therefore, Aatmaram Chandane emphasized Buddhist practices in daily life to inspire people.

Dr. Hamraj Uike has shared a similar experience. He says problems begin at home. Half of his relatives are still not convinced about Buddhism and Ambedkarism as life-changing religious ideologies. His relatives do not resist any conversation about it but do not accept it. He does not blame them because he says it took many years, several life experiences, and different kinds of exposure to shift his ideas and thoughts. He gave an example about himself,

*"I remember that I used to observe fasting every Thursday till my graduation. It took me time to come out of such practices. I do not pass judgment on my relatives, for they still follow Hindu traditions. It may negatively impact if I start passing judgment and confronting them."*²⁷⁴

The Hindu social system is dominant and continuously influences communities' day-to-day life to ensure people are in the loop. In comparison, the Buddhist system is not that active in propagating and following it up daily. They also lack the resources, both material as well as spiritual. There should be continuous efforts from the Buddhist community to educate about its philosophy and principles and pull the community out of the clutches of Hindutva ideology and practices,

The other argument activists give in favor of prioritizing the spread of awareness and educating the community first is that Dr. Ambedkar himself took more than 20 years from his first announcement of conversion in 1935 at Yeola, Nashik, to his actual conversion to Buddhism in

²⁷³ Interview with Ajinkya Chandane on 7th May 2018.

²⁷⁴ Interview with Dr. Hamraj Uike at his residence in Beed town on 11th April 2018.

the year 1956 at Nagpur. Similarly, the community leaders and activists leading the anti-caste movement also took more than 40 years to accept Buddha's dhamma and convert. They did not directly reach there in their journey of accepting Buddha's dhamma. They had their journeys from being Hindus to reaching Buddha through constant engagement with the anti-caste movement. It was not the case with the community. They lack constant engagement with the question of Buddhas Dhamma.

Illiteracy and backwardness are common obstacles marginalized communities face, and livelihood issues are a priority for them. Therefore, all the activists, irrespective of their conversion status, agreed that there was a need to politicize the masses. Educate them about anti-caste history, thoughts, and ideas of anti-caste leaders and their contribution to society. So just pushing everyone for a mere conversion ritual will not change anything substantially. Therefore, all of them believed in the strategy of political socialization of the masses before taking conversion rituals.

Ambedkarism, a vision of casteless society: Correlation between concepts of Political Socialization and Ambedkarism

As it has been perceived by the community leaders that there is a need for active engagement with the community to mobilize and politicize them by introducing them to the anti-caste movement. However, political socialization starts at a young age and is an idea of habit formation (Neundorf and Smets, 2015).²⁷⁵ Neundorf and Smets (2015) further argue that citizens crystalize political identities, values, and behavior they learned through the Political socialization process remains constant throughout later life.

²⁷⁵ Neundorf, Anja and Smets, Kaat. (2015). *Political Socialization and Making of Citizens*. In Oxford Handbooks Editorial Board, Oxford Handbook Topics in Politics (online edn, Oxford Academic, 6 Aug. 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935307.001.0001>, accessed 15 Oct. 2022.

Dr. Ambedkar's vision for the active *Sangha* came from a visit to Burma and Sri Lanka, where he was shocked to see that Bhikkus (Buddhist monks) did not seem to care about the community around them (Zelliot, 1992:222).²⁷⁶ As discussed in the third chapter, to a certain extent, Bhikkus succeeded in stabilizing the Buddhist life world in Maharashtra but primarily done in urban spaces.²⁷⁷ Bhikkus confined themselves to the Buddha *Vihara* and limited their role to administering the life cycle rituals on various occasions. The primary responsibility of taking Buddhism to the masses and teaching them Buddhist philosophy required extensive traveling and frequent contact with local communities. Contrary to this, the Bhikkus confined themselves to the Buddha *Vihara* and the local communities in urban pockets. As a result, the missionary work of Buddhism got stalled.

The dearth of trained Buddhist monks and the intention to reach out to the masses left a vacuum in the anti-caste movement. It resulted in communities continuing to learn about their habits and ideas about their beliefs and practices from the dominant Hindu culture around them. Therefore, it is a stiff challenge for the anti-caste movement to make people unlearn the caste beliefs and practices they have learned from a young age.

Zelliot (1992:222)²⁷⁸ further argued that "*the contemporary Buddhist conversion movement in India arose neither from a missionary enterprise which carried its organizational structure and leadership nor from the Buddha-ization of a highly developed existing religious structure. Unlike any other mass conversion in history, this new religious movement was almost completely on its*

²⁷⁶ Zelliot, Eleanor (1992:222). *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*. New Delhi, Manohar.

²⁷⁷ See Kurane (1999) & Beltz (2005)

²⁷⁸ Zelliot, Eleanor (1992:222). *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*. New Delhi, Manohar

own." The new converts lack the resources. Most of the Bhikkus remained engaged in life cycle rituals and related functions owing to a dearth of trained Bhikkus in Maharashtra. Hence, to fill this gap, Ambedkar suggested training lay Buddhists as a preacher who can take care of the immediate needs of the new converts at the local level.²⁷⁹ The followers of Ambedkar took up the responsibility and became preachers called '*Baudhacharya*- lay Buddhist preachers.'

In the recent past, the new Buddhist conversion movement in Maharashtra was preceded by the active Ambedkarite movement among non-*Mahar* communities. Ambedkarism is new terminology being used in anti-caste discourse by followers of Ambedkar.²⁸⁰ It has become the shared vision for the anti-caste movement. Omvedt (2014:225) calls Ambedkarism an ideology of the broader anti-caste movement in India.²⁸¹ Those who follow Ambedkar and practice his philosophy of anti-caste thoughts are called Ambedkarite.

Omvedt (2014:226)²⁸² summarizes the contents of Ambedkarism as an ideology; it contains "First, an uncompromising dedication to the needs of his people." Here 'his people' mean the Dalits. However, it is not limited to ex-untouchable castes in a larger context. Ambedkarism stands for all those who are oppressed. Here I refer to the meaning given by Dalit Panthers to the term Dalit.²⁸³ Second, Ambedkarism strives to "establish fraternity, brotherhood, and equality" among everyone. It requires, as Ambedkar suggests, the "total annihilation of the caste system" and the Brahmanical

²⁷⁹ Ambedkar, B.R. (2020: 508), *Buddhist Movement in India: A Blue Print*. In Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part III.

²⁸⁰ See Yengde, Suraj and Teltumbde, Anand (eds), (2018). *The Radical in Ambedkar: Critical Reflections*. Gurgaon, Penguin Random House.

²⁸¹ Omvedt, Gail. (2014: 225). *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*. From e-copy of the book.

²⁸² Omvedt, Gail. (2014: 226). *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*. From e-copy of book.

²⁸³ As per the Manifesto of Dalit Panther, the term Dalit includes members of Scheduled castes and tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working-class people, the landless and poor peasants, women, and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion.

scriptures and the superiority they embodied. Ambedkarism stands for and is convinced that eradicating caste required a "rejection of Hinduism as a religion." Ambedkarism also suggests an alternative religion, that is Buddhism. With this choice of religion, Ambedkarism ingrains a strong sense of rationalism against the superstition in Hinduism. A choice is necessary for the masses irrespective of their social status. His interpretation of Buddhism as 'liberation theology' has the scope for democratic liberalism and individual rights. Moreover, finally, it is a political orientation that believes in the autonomous movement. It propagates ideas of Phule for an alliance of the socially and economically exploited communities, ex-untouchable castes, and Shudra castes as an alternative political front to the collusion of upper castes.

Ambedkarism, therefore, refers to a political ideology with a spiritual essence that connects to the Buddha's philosophy through the rejection of Hinduism and conversion to Buddhism. Therefore, becoming an Ambedkarite is the first step toward becoming a conscious community that is a base for becoming a Buddhist, as conversion to Buddhism is a conscious process. Various organizations and leaders are working with the community to socialize them politically. Highlighting social injustice meted out with the marginalized communities, disgraceful living conditions of marginalized communities, and structural inequalities associated with caste became the mainstay of the activists to reach out to the masses. It is an activity where activist missionaries convince their fellow community members that caste is the reason for their problems.

The solution to these problems lies in converting from Hinduism since caste is an integral part of Hinduism. They also believe Buddhism will help improve oppressed castes' social conditions and emancipate them. Therefore, political socialization in this context is a conscious process through which the masses belonging to different castes who were away from the conversion movement for a long time are organized and raised their consciousness about the anti-

caste movement and Buddhism. This process aims to convince them that social structures based on caste are at the root of all problems faced by marginalized communities.

The conception of Activist Missionary among non-Mahar castes: The Answer to the ambiguity of who should preach the legacy of Dr. Ambedkar and Buddha

Ambedkar had faith and belief in his followers that they would work for the annihilation of Caste through Buddhism in India. Ambedkar said that

*"I have been struggling throughout my life to abolish this evil practice of division based on caste and mutual hatred. In reality, I feel guilty for starting late the work of revival of Buddhism in India. But even then, I hope and believe that my people who, sacrificing their comforts, have been faithfully following me. I hope, and I trust they will continue to struggle sincerely to propagate the Buddha Dhamma in India."*²⁸⁴

Along similar lines, Ambedkar's followers took the responsibility of spreading the ideas and philosophy of Buddhism across Maharashtra and the country as lay preachers. That is how the once-forgotten and extinguished religion from its land of origin got new patrons amongst the followers of Dr. Ambedkar. However, as mentioned before, most of the Buddhist followers of Dr. Ambedkar majority of them belonged to the *Mahar* community. Therefore, most of the *Baudhacharya*- lay Buddhist preachers, also belonged to the *Mahar* caste.

In his speech, Dr. Ambedkar (2004:8), while addressing a *Mahar* Conference, said, "To materialize the goal of conversion, it is very important to judge the public opinion of all the

²⁸⁴ Ambedkar, B.R. (2013:449-50). *I believe, my people will sacrifice everything to establish Buddhism in India*, Writing and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part I.

communities."²⁸⁵ In contrast to the judgment reached by a joint conference of all the castes, Dr. Ambedkar thought that public opinion, as determined through gatherings of each caste separately, is more representative and trustworthy. It was evident from the fact that most Buddhist followers in Maharashtra belonged to the *Mahar* caste; there was not much work done on public opinion about Buddhist conversion among non-*Mahar* castes in Maharashtra. As a result, very few individuals belonging to non-*Mahar* castes were part of the Buddhist conversion movement.

Dr. Ambedkar addressed many gatherings, including gatherings of *Mahars* and other non-*Mahar* castes, such as *Matangs*. However, since Dr. Ambedkar was *Mahar* by Caste and a charismatic leader, he significantly impacted people from his caste. *Mahars* became part of Ambedkar's conversion decision after his appeal for the conversion to Buddhism. Along similar lines, to create a public opinion of conversion among non-*Mahar* communities, efforts were needed by activists and community leaders coming from non-*Mahar* communities.

Community leaders such as Eknath Awad, G.S. Dada Kamble, Aatamaram Chandane, and Hanumant Upare in the Marathwada region made efforts to organize the community for social change. They made efforts to politicize the particular castes about anti-caste thoughts and ideas and further took efforts to take Buddhism and its teaching to respective communities. I have briefly discussed their life journeys of becoming Ambedkarite in the last chapter. They tried their best to put up a united fight against Brahmanism and push the anti-caste agenda for the non-Brahmins to uplift themselves from the caste oppression they faced. Given the rigid social structure and animosities between communities within a caste-based social system bringing people together for social change is a stiff task. These individuals and leaders took the organizational way and founded

²⁸⁵ Ambedkar, B.R. (2004). *Conversion as emancipation*. New Delhi: Critical Quest.

institutions with a specific vision and aim to politicize the masses and spread Ambedkarism among marginalized communities.

Eknath Awad founded *Manavi Hakka Abhiyan*-MHA (Campaign for Human Rights), Aatmaram Chandane started the Democratic Party of India (DPI), and G.S. Dada Kamble started organizing people through the *Satyashodhak Samaj Mahasangh* (SSM). All these leaders worked tirelessly, primarily amongst the *Matang* community and beyond, to politicize them, create public opinion, and motivate them to convert to Buddhism. Community leaders like Laxman Mane aim to reach out to indigenous people and educate them about anti-caste philosophy. In order to attract OBCs into the Buddhist fold, the Satyashodhak OBC Parishad, an OBC-led movement started by the late Hanumant Upare and currently headed by his son Sandeep Upare, has been instrumental.

These activists and leaders of the community belong to non-*Mahar* castes. Their activities are prominently happening amongst the non-*Mahar* communities of the Marathwada region. The activism they all engaged with revolves around Ambedkarism as an ideology. These leaders showed the courage which Ambedkar expected from his followers to tell the oppressors what was wrong with them in their religion. Eventually, Adv Awad and GS Dada Kamble converted to Buddhism. Hanumant Upare Kaka passed away before the proposed date of his conversion to Buddhism. Aatmaram Chandane had a different take on conversion. He was practicing Buddhism and had not undertaken conversion ritually; therefore, he was Buddhist in the spiritual sense.

Unfortunately, all of them are not alive today. Aatmaram Chandane passed away on 11th October 2011, followed by Hanumant Upare and Eknath Awad, both of whom passed away in 2015 within a gap of two months. Upare kaka passed away on 19th March, and Awad passed away on 25th May 2015. G S Dada passed away during my fieldwork on 27th March 2019. It was a

massive loss to Phule-Ambedkarite anti-caste movement in Maharashtra and the Marathwada region. However, all of them are still relevant through the contribution they have made in their lifetime. Their followers are motivated enough to carry forward the unfinished work of their respective leaders and follow the path of Ambedkarism toward Buddhism shown by their leaders.

Adv Eknath Awad has left his legacy by training many community leaders who now independently take forward the work of Awad. Community leaders like Manisha Tokle, Ashok Tangade, Dhimant Rashtupal, Ashok Palke, and Raju Ghode, to name a few, are working at the grassroots level and taking Buddha's message to the masses. Awad's family members, his wife Gayabai and son Prof. Milind Awad are leading the *Manavi Hakka Abhiyan* and the community in their capacities through active engagement.

Similarly, G S Dada Kamble also has left a strong legacy in the form of *Satyashodhak Samaj Mahasangha* (SSM) and *Satyashodhak Student's Federation* (SSF). D S Narsinge and his team presently lead SSM. *Baudhamay Bharat Abhiyan*- the program of making India Buddhist is their main motto. Volunteers like Rahul Gaikwad, Mangal Kamble, Manoj Kamble, Laxman Shinde, Sharda Pagare, Dharmaraj Mujamule, and Ganga Ghodke, to name a few are working along with D S Narsinge. All of them have worked under the leadership of G S Dada Kamble. Most are employed in the government sector, few in the private sector, and others are full-time activists. The younger generation is also coming forward and taking responsibility through SSF. Student leaders like Chagan Lashkare, Anand Suryavanshi, and Lashkare Sahebrao are working with the student community in the Marathwada region.

Hanumant Upare Kaka has also left a rich legacy behind him. Upare Kaka and his lifelong struggle for OBC questions made him roam throughout Maharashtra, visit the remotest villages

and communities to politicize them, and organize many OBC struggles. He was a prolific speaker and writer. He inspired many individuals across the communities who later joined his movement Chalo Buddha Ki Aur Abhiyan. Activists like Laxman Dhawale, Amarsing Dhaka, Laxman Gunjal, Sangameshwar Andhalkar, Balasaheb Sontakke, Vishal Raut, Mahesh Ninale, and Sadashiv Sutar are active on the ground along with Sandip Upare and Santosh Upare who are leading Satyashodhak OBC Parishad after their father's Hanumant Upare's demise.

Democratic Party of India (DPI), co-founded by Aatmaram Chandane, has been led by Prof Sukumar Kamble sir at the state level. Ajinkya Chandane is leading the party in the Marathwada region. DPI has emerged strong voice of the *Matang* community in the region under Ajinkya Chandane. Several activists and party members such as Subhash Lonke, J T Salve, Datta Kasbe, Babasaheb More, Santosh Kasbe, Bhaiya More, Ramesh Dhage, etc., to name a few are working along with Ajinkya Chandane in Beed district. Primarily, they are activists and community workers. They are employed in government and the private sector; some are active as political leaders. However, they took the role of religious preachers and started doing missionary work for Buddhism. Therefore, I identify them as activist missionaries as envisioned by Dr. Ambedkar, who is working with the community in difficult situations, supporting them in various ways, and reaching out to the masses to spread Ambedkarism in the community.

Though the activists are associated with different organizations, they have been trained under different leaders. They are all associated with each other and come to common platforms whenever required. They all support each other on several occasions, attend meetings and programs organized by other organizations and guide each other on issues concerning all. For instance, after the demise of G S Dada Kamble, on his birth anniversary, activists and members of SSM organized a meeting to elect the next president of the organization and decide the plan of

action for the movement. SSM organized the meeting at the Rural Development Center of Manavi Hakka Abhiyan, Telgaon. Gayabai Awad, the wife of Eknath Awad, was present for the meeting, and she assured all kinds of support to the SSM members in their endeavors. For the same meeting state organizer of Satyashodhak OBC Parishad, Amarsing Dhaka was also present. He attended the meeting as a *Buddha May Bharat Abhiyan* representative to extend their support for the mission. Therefore, all the activists are coordinating within themselves to achieve the common goal of spreading Buddhism to the masses.

Who should preach the Buddha's Message?

The activist missionary active in the Buddhist movement consisted of self-motivated activists, leaders, and volunteers who started to take up people's issues and fight for the cause of social justice. The anti-caste movements in different phases and contexts certainly impact activists in their respective lives. However, there is always a possibility of deviation from and adulterating Buddha's original teachings and principles. Therefore, the question also needs to be asked are there any criteria for who should go to the community to preach Buddhism and Buddha's ideas and thoughts in the anti-caste movement in Maharashtra?

Regarding the essential qualification of the preachers in the contemporary anti-caste movement, Buddha had set some minimum qualifications for his followers in the Sangha to become a preacher and go to the community to preach the Buddha's doctrines. As Gail Omvedt (2003) argued, when Ambedkar converted to Buddhism, he challenged Brahmanical Hinduism and existing interpretations of Buddhism. Dr. Ambedkar challenged the popularly accepted beliefs about Buddhism, which were not going along with the basic teachings of Buddha. For example, beliefs in traditional Buddhism, such as the four noble truths and the theory of rebirth, were denied

by Dr. Ambedkar in his interpretations of Buddhism. Hence, there is always a possibility of wrong information being passed on to the community and followers, which does not adhere to Buddha's rationality and principles of justice, equality, and fraternity.

Non-*Mahar* communities feel that the tradition of *prabodhan*²⁸⁶ among Buddhist monks has been lost with time. To a certain extent, we can say that Buddhists have abandoned it in Maharashtra post-conversion. The institutionalization of the structural framework of Buddhism and its preachers is lost in Maharashtra among neo-Buddhist. There is a need to have a proper structure for Buddhist institutions, and proper training should be given to people about Buddhism. Well-articulated and approved content of the preacher makes things easier for participants. It gains popularity and acceptance among the masses. In the absence of such a well-structured initiative to preach Buddhist philosophy to the masses, the community has its ways of judging and approving the authenticity of activists working there.

Gaining the community's trust is difficult for the activist missionary. The community never accepts ready-made leaders who directly reach the podiums to preach. The social activism and uncompromised struggle of activists and leaders won them the community's confidence. Even to be invited as a guest speaker to guide the community at Ambedkar Jayanti gatherings, a speaker must be known in the activist circle as someone who has made a specific contribution to society through their active participation in the anti-caste movement. Along with it, the person must have command over Ambedkarite and anti-caste literature. The community members recommend and refer such speakers to each other. People from the local community keep track of who is active in

²⁸⁶ *Prabodhan* is an activity in which learned people educate others about ideas and principles of ideology and practices. They keep on pursuing people and keep them in a loop.

the anti-caste circle around them and work for the community cause. They only call such personalities to guide the lay masses. The leaders who went on to organize masses, politicize them, and lead them to conversion to Buddhism also had to go through this phase.

Adv Eknath Awad started his journey as a social activist and went to organize numerous protest gatherings, challenged authorities sitting in power positions, challenged village feudal lords, and resisted upper castes and their cultural domination in villages before converting to Buddhism. His sacrifices and commitment to the cause gained him a respectable position in the community, so much so that when he gave a call for conversion to Buddhism, thousands of his followers came forward and took an active part in the conversion movement and got converted to Buddhism.

G S Dada as well sacrificed for the community. He worked as a full-time missionary worker without caring about his family and spent his entire life on issues of the community and spreading awareness among them. G S Dada had the unique approach of focusing on the education of the younger generation. By facilitating the younger generation to pursue education, he ensured they did not deviate and succeed in life. The same is the case with Hanumant Upare, a successful businessman. It was a considerable risk for him to enter into public life and openly take a stand against Hinduism, and inequality prevailed in the religion. He not only took a stand against Hinduism but also went on to mobilize the community against it. He was part of many protest gatherings and resisted anti-people policies of the state. Protests erupted against the implementation of the Mandal commission and the OBC reservation in the 1990s, which saw a significant confrontation between the oppressor and oppressed castes. Hanumant Upare had led many such protest marches against the oppressor caste and supported the OBC reservation. The

community leaders got recognition for their work in the community and significantly impacted followers.

Dr. Uike is one of the critical scholars and activists who are active in the present time and attends many gatherings as a speaker to guide them. He has presided over hundreds of Jayanti events and guided people by introducing Ambedkarite ideology in simple language. Dr. Hamraj Uike narrated his experience of they- a group of activists and academicians could gain their community's trust through active engagement with social issues and problems faced by local communities. He speaks,

"After my education and since I started teaching as Assistant Professor in a college, I have never spent my winter and summer vacations at home. I travel to remote villages and backward regions of the state to reach out to the people. I believe that just earning a degree is not enough. We should use our education for the betterment of our society. If I claim I got a legacy of committed teachers, I should also show that commitment in my personal and professional life. We visited and worked with people on various social issues during those vacation periods, for example, in Jharimata village in the Yawatmal district of Maharashtra, where the issue of teenage mothers was grave. Our volunteers stayed in that village for a month, did field work, and made a report on the situation. We sent that report to the women's commission, and later Superintendent of Police of the district Akhilesh Kumar was instructed to take cognizance of the issue and file cases based on the complaints of the parents. It created an atmosphere of trust in our work and, ultimately, about us among the

local community. This sense of social responsibility in me is developed because of the Phule-Ambedkarite thought process."²⁸⁷

Similarly, social activists and leaders like Manisha Tai and Ajinkya Chandane, who are active in current times, organize and participate in protest gatherings and raise the issues of human rights violations and atrocities against marginalized people. During my fieldwork, two major caste atrocities happened in the Marathwada region, where victims belonged to the *Matang* community. On 10th May 2018, a *Matang* family was assaulted by accused belonging to the upper caste community for the reason *Matang* family entered the Hanuman temple of the village Rudrawadi. Another incident happened on 9th June 2018 at Vakadi village. Three young boys from the *Matang* community were stripped and brutally beaten up by upper-caste villagers for swimming in a well belonging to the upper caste family.

The community leaders like Ajinkya Chandane, Ashok Palke, and Dhimant Rashtupal organized protest gatherings at Beed and Ambejogai towns of the district. They blocked the roads in protest and paid a visit to victims of caste atrocity to assure them that they were with the victims in the struggle for justice. Activists arranged a team of lawyers to assist them in the legal aspects of the case. There are two aspects of legal help, first is the immediate response to the issue and arranging immediate help in terms of protection and primary investigation and needful for further action. Second is continuous support and making sure the family gets justice. Activists like Manisha Tai monitor the proceeding and ensure families get rehabilitated in their long-term settlement post-atrocity.

²⁸⁷ Interview with Dr. Hamraj Uike at his residence in Beed town on 11th April 2018.

Activists like Dhimant Rashtrapal and Ashok Tangade work on preventive aspects of exploitation and violation of rights. They believe people can fight for themselves if they know their rights. Therefore, Dhimant Rashtrapal is spreading constitution literacy among people by performing street plays and monologues at public places, schools, and colleges as a volunteer without any remunerations. He also brings up issues of public concern at the administrative level by highlighting state apathy in solving fundamental issues of public importance, such as access to medical help for the marginalized and poor people and issues of corruption in municipal corporations. He is running a hostel for orphans and destitute girls with the help of community participation. Manisha Tai and Ashok Bhau work as full-time social activists and raise issues of single and destitute women, landless laborers, children of sugarcane cutters, and orphans. Manisha Tai is vocal about atrocities, domestic abuse, and violence against women.

These are some examples of community leaders and their activities in the community. All of them are well-revered and respected individuals. They are also associated with different social organizations. As a member of the Democratic Party of India (DPI), Ajinkya Chandane has been active. Manisha Tai works in the community through the Lokajagar Pratishthan and the Sugarcane Cutter Women's Organization. Dhimant Rashtrapal is a part of a campaign called Manus Vachava Andolan, or "Campaign for Saving Humanity." Ashok Palke is the founding president of *Yuva Andolan*, and he was also associated with Eknath Awad and *Manavi Hakka Abhiyan* in his early years of social activism. They are all active in the Ambedkarite movement and vocal about Buddhist conversion.

Strategies of Activist Missionary in political socialization and Factors lead to the conversion of non-*Mahar* castes to Buddhism in Maharashtra

The political socialization through the Ambedkarization of communities and convincing them to turn towards Buddhism is complex in their strategies. It mainly involves highlighting the caste oppression and exploitation of oppressed castes by oppressor castes of the Hindu religion. Since every caste has a different experience of oppression based on its place in the caste hierarchy, different approaches are being deployed in this process. Some start it due to the oppressed communities' absence from state development initiatives and their underrepresentation in various positions of power with decision-making authority. Some dwell on the ongoing violence and crimes based on the caste that they experience. For some, it is about their experience of being denied citizenship rights and other fundamental human rights. On some occasions, it is done by combining different experiences of the community they face.

One common way to politically socialize the communities is to ethnicize the caste. I borrowed the term 'ethnicization of castes' from Jaffrelot (2005)²⁸⁸ to justify caste-based awareness programs run by activists to spread anti-caste ideologies among specific castes to mobilize them for social change by activist missionaries. Waghmore (2013:151)²⁸⁹ argues that "the ethnicization of caste involves acknowledging and asserting caste in a non-hierarchical fashion in anti-caste politics." The difficult task of ethnicization of caste is done by spreading anti-caste ideas of social reformers who are predominantly from the same castes.

²⁸⁸ Quoted in Waghmore, Suryakant. (2014:151). *Civility against Caste: Dalit Politics and Citizenship in Western India*, New Delhi: Sage Publication.

²⁸⁹ Ibid

Those involved in this process use different approaches to initiate interaction with anti-caste ideology and the politicization of communities. When the activists go into the community, they talk about the wretched state of people from marginalized sections and the discrimination they face daily. They talk about caste atrocities against marginalized communities and ask them about the religion of those who commit atrocities and those who are victims of those atrocities. People reply, saying both are Hindus. Then the question is posed to them: if both are Hindus, why does one discriminate and commit atrocities against the other? People usually do not have an answer for this. It is upper-caste Hindus who are committing atrocities against lower castes. Dhimant Rashtrapal, a full-time social activist, narrated his experience of dealing with the community in this regard; he asks questions to his fellow community-

"Matangs are part of the Hindu religion and perform and practice Hindu rituals.

They pray to Hindu gods and goddesses. I ask those Matangs who pray to Hindu gods about their place of dwelling in the village. It is obviously in the village peripheries. I question them, does praying to the Hindu god give you any space for dwelling in the main village? Are you being accepted as one among them?

*You continued to stay at the same place where untouchables were supposed to stay."*²⁹⁰

To such questions, sometimes people ask counter-questions. They counter the arguments by giving the example of *Mahars* who have converted to Buddhism and do not pray to Hindu gods, but still, they are staying at the same place where untouchable *Mahars* are supposed to stay in the village. What change has conversion brought into their dwelling place? To these counter questions,

²⁹⁰ Interview with Dhimant Rashtrapal on 9th May 2018.

activists further ask them whether they face such atrocities at the hands of other Dalit castes. The answer for the same comes in negative. Dalits are not committing atrocities on Dalits. The non-Dalit upper castes commit the atrocities. Activists often face counter-arguments from fellow community members when they warn community members about the ill-nature of caste and the need to abandon it and convert to the new religion (Buddhism).

Activists also often grapple with questions such as, even after conversion, *Mahars* (not all) continued to practice Hindu rituals and pray to Hindu gods, conversion has not changed them entirely, and you are speaking about changing us? For all of them who raised such questions, activists had only one answer. The answer is that 'caste' is not ideal, and *Mahar* is also a caste. Therefore, it can never be ideal. Ashok Palke, while addressing this question, says-

*"My ideals are Dr. Ambedkar and Buddha. Buddha's dhamma and his philosophy are not restricted to one caste. It is universal. There are people from across the globe who follows Buddhism. People from China, Japan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Malaysia, and other eastern countries follow Buddhism. If you compare India with these countries, you will realize that they are far ahead of us. They follow Buddha because Buddhism taught them scientific temperament. India is a country lagging because they lack a scientific approach. I tell them there is no harm in following Buddha and his teaching, but there is more damage to the individual in Hinduism, which propagates caste."*²⁹¹

Some get convinced by activists' arguments and agree that caste is an issue, but some still do not. Dhimant Rashtrapal says, *"Change is a process and will not happen in a day or two. It is*

²⁹¹ Interview with Ashok Palke on 9th May 2018.

not new to me to handle such questions. I have faced similar arguments from my family members. Personally, for my family, it took time to make them understand. You cannot force anyone to change; it should come from within."²⁹² Not accepting anything without questioning is Buddhist teaching. Even if it is about considering caste an evil social, people take their time and judge the facts based on their experiences.

Leaders and activists popularized the writings of anti-caste leaders like Phule, Shahu, Ambedkar, and Kanshiram through songs of resistance, public speeches, making anti-caste literature available for everyone, and other cultural activities. It shapes the thinking of marginalized communities during the social movement led by marginalized communities. Though the process of political socialization and awakening of conscious minds is universal and can be observed in various parts of India, I am contextualizing it in the Marathwada region and the Beed district in particular. For example, "among the *Matang* community, anti-caste ideas of Anna Bhau Sathe, Lahuji Salave, and Mukta Salve who belonged to the same community have been propagated. Similarly, among *Charmakars*, it has been done by propagating the anti-caste ideas of Sant Ravidas. Among OBC, this has been done by spreading thoughts and ideas of Mahatma Phule and Savitribai Phule, their anti-caste discourse of *Sarvajanik Satyadharma* and *Satyashodhak Samaj* (the truth seeker society) in Maharashtra."²⁹³ In an effort to provide a unifying platform for the introduction of Buddhism, activists draw attention to the connections between Ambedkarism and the anti-caste philosophy of other social reformers.

²⁹² Interview with Dhimant Rashtrapal on 9th May 2018.

²⁹³ Ghadage, Tushar. (2020). Ambedkarites in Making: The Process of awakening and Conversion to Buddhism among Non-Mahar communities in Maharashtra. *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*. Vol. 1, No. 2, October 2020. Pp. 107-120.

Mobilization of Buddhist, Matang, and Charmakar in the Marathwada region: Political activism for uniting Matang with Ambedkarism

The *Matang* is the second-largest SC caste in Maharashtra. Therefore, bringing the *Mahars* and Matangs together is essential to mark unity among marginalized castes. Ajinkya Chandane says the *Matangs* have been kept ignorant because it benefits the ruling classes. If *Matangs* became aware of their strengths, they would assert themselves. Therefore, *Matangs* are provoked against *Mahars* so that they will not unite. The *Matang* community still does not know well about Anna Bhau Sathe. The celebration of Anna Bhau Sathe Jayanti is also seen as counter to *Mahars* as they celebrate Ambedkar Jayanti. As discussed earlier, there is a feeling of *Irsha-* jealousy/competition among *Mahar* and *Matang*. To bridge the gap between these two crucial communities in Maharashtra, organizations are working on it.

For instance, DPI working primarily amongst the *Matang* community, regularly organizes camps for its cadres. In which they discuss the topics of Ambedkarite ideology and its connection to the Matang community. They spread awareness among the *Matang* community. One such camp was organized by DPI under the leadership of Ajinkya Chandane on 20th May 2018 at Dharur in Beed district (See Figure 4.1). The camp was named *Ambedkarvadi Matang Sabha-* Assembly of Ambedkarite *Matangs*. The assembly title is inspired by Ambedkar's organization, Bahishkrut Hitkarini Sabha, which was formed to mobilize the then-untouchable castes under the banner of the assembly for the wellbeing of the untouchables under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar.

Very few people know that Anna Bhau has dedicated *Fakira*, one of his best novels, to Dr. Ambedkar. On the first page of *Fakira*, it is written that this novel is dedicated to Path breaking and brave writings of Dr. Ambedkar. Ajinkya Chandane says people do not know about this kind

of linkage between our great leaders. It is our responsibility to make them understand this connection. He accuses the ruling classes of separating Anna Bhau from the Ambedkarite movement and links him to communist ideology. However, it is not valid. Anna Bhau returned to Ambedkarite ideology at the end part of his life. Anna Bhau had also written a story on Buddha. Its title was Buddha chi Shapath- an oath of Buddha.



Figure 4.1: Leaflet advertising the *Ambedkarvadi Matang Sabha*.

The Ambedkarite *Matang* leaders argue that one must consider why Anna Bhau dedicated his last work to Dr. Ambedkar and why he wrote the story on Buddha. It is an indication for people to follow the path of Buddha and Ambedkar. One of the poetic expressions of Anna Bhau, '*Jag Badal Ghaluni Ghav, Sangun Gele Maj Bhimrao*' (Bhimrao-Ambedkar has told me to change this world with the stroke) suggests that he was following the path shown by Ambedkar. Through Anna Bhau, they are introducing Ambedkarism to the youth of the *Matang* community and leading them

to Ambedkar and eventually to Buddhism. They believe that once the *Matang* community accepts Ambedkar, it is easy to convince them of the teaching of Buddha. Therefore, going for Buddhist conversion through Anna Bhau, Dr. Ambedkar, and then Buddha is convenient. The leaflet published by DPI consciously included images of Anna Bhau, Ambedkar, Phule, Kanshiram, and other social reformers in the poster. The activist also uses a slogan that says, '*Anna Teri Bat Par, Chale Bhim ki Rah par,*' which means 'Oh Anna (Anna Bhau Sathe), for your word, we walk on the path shown by Bhima (Ambedkar).'

On 11th March 2018, DPI, under Ajinkya Chandane's leadership, organized *Fakira Arpan Parishad* at Majalgaon town in Beed district. Anna Bhau published his iconic novel *Fakira* in March 1959, dedicated to Dr. Ambedkar for his inspirational writings. To commemorate this event, DPI decided to celebrate and named it *Fakira Arpan Parishad*- Convention to commemorate *Fakira* dedication day. It attempted to create alternative events for the community to celebrate Anna Bhau Sathe's life events. It is also an opportunity to establish the connection between Ambedkarite thoughts and ideas and new icons among *Matang* youth and attract them towards Ambedkarite ideology.

Like-minded leaders and activists also make efforts from the Marathwada region to form a larger alliance of major SC castes of the region. It is done through organizing meetings and assemblies of activists and communities from the region under one banner. *Bauddha, Matang, Charmakar Parishad*- the meeting was organized at Usmanabad by Republican Mahasabha on the birth anniversary of Sant Ravidas on 23rd February 2019. Sant Ravidas is a well-revered saint in the anti-caste movement and the *Charmakar* community. *Charmakar* is one of the significant SC castes after *Mahar* and *Matangs* in Maharashtra. Therefore, organizing such an event on the birth

[illegible]

Some activists and leaders from the Beed district were invited to this Parishad at Usmanabad. Activists cutting across the organizations took part in it: Dr. Milind Awad- National president of *Manavi Hakka Abhiyan*, founded by Eknath Awad; Rajesh Ghode- district president of *Manavi Hakka Abhiyan*, Beed; D S Narsinghe- president of *Satyashodhak Samaj Mahasangh* founded by G S Dada Kamble, Manisha Tokle- activists who had worked with Eknath Awad, Ashok Palke- President of *Yuva Andolan* and also had worked under the leadership of Eknath Awad were some of the crucial leaders, activists, practitioners, and academicians who are working in Marathwada and Beed was part of this gathering. Shriranga Thorat, a senior Ambedkarite activist and founder of *Fakira Dal* from Kaij, inaugurated the event. It was presided over by Shahir

Gangadhar Paul, founder, and president of *Republican Mahasabha*. They all echoed the same vision of casteless society and organic unity amongst marginalized communities for a better future.

The occasion of 23rd February and the venue of the meeting, Kasbe Tadavale (Dhoki) of the Usmanabad district, had some historical references. It was the place where Ambedkar attended the *Mahar-Mang and Vatandar Parishad* on 23rd February 1941. Therefore, this meeting was also aimed at reviving the glorious history of the anti-caste movement and unity among oppressed castes. Through such camps and meetings, activist missionaries spread awareness among the community and convinced them of how caste has been an exploitative and significant obstacle to the progress of the community.

Activist missionary engaged in Buddhist conversion through *Satyashodhak Samaj Mahasangha* invests their time and energy in the younger generation. Activists believe that the younger generation has not been influenced much by Hindutva ideology compared to the older generation. Older people have been rooted in Hindu culture, and it is difficult to convince them to leave behind what they have been practicing for decades. Activists have to spend more time discussing discriminatory practices of their religion than the Universal religion of Buddhism while interacting with the older generation. On the other hand, they can speak more about Buddha's egalitarian religion and practices and its global connection while interacting with the younger generation. However, this does not mean activists have given up on older people. Missionary work with the vision that the older generation might not leave their old traditions and religion soon but will work towards the younger generation and ensure they will not be trapped in the vicious cycle of caste exploitation.

It was the days they encountered the Ambedkarite movement. People also started reading about social revolutionists like Phule, Shahu, and Ambedkar and their writings on the anti-caste struggle. It created havoc in the minds about the social and religious exploitation of Dalits and marginalized section of the society. Never was religion problematized by people. After reading the anti-caste literature, people considered caste's exploitative nature seriously. The continuation of discrimination based on caste and the realization that they are caught up in superstitions, and ritualistic routines resulted in a lack of education and employment, and loss of dignity and self-respect were significant realizations of the communities. They are unwilling to accept the lower position in the caste hierarchy by remaining Hindu. As long as they remain as Hindus, they will not be treated on par with other humans. Therefore they prefer to convert to Buddhism.

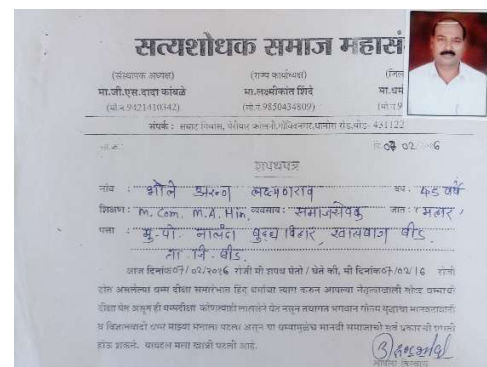


Figure 4.3: Participants reciting 22 oaths at the conversion ceremony organized by Satyashodhak Samaj Mahasangha at Beed (left) and Proforma of affidavit undertaken by the converts (right).²⁹⁴

Satyashodhak Samaj Mahasangha, so far, has organized 13 conversion events across Maharashtra. In the year 2016, such an event was organized at Beed town under the leadership of G S Dada Kamble. Anandraj Ambedkar, the grandson of Babasaheb Ambedkar, was the chief guest at the event (See Figure 4.3). About 1000 people from the Beed district belonging to various castes, such as *Mahar*, *Matang*, and *Charmakar*, participated voluntarily and converted to

²⁹⁴ Pictures re-produced with permission from Dharmaraj Majamule.

Buddhism. Bhante Upagupt Mahathero of *Bodhisatva Dr. B R Ambedkar Smarak and Buddha Vihar Samiti*, Purna conferred Dhamma Deeksha on the participants. All the participants were asked to do prior registration for the conversion.

People always had unrest about their deplorable condition and lower status in the Hindu religion. However, It was when the community leader was working among Dalits in general and the *Matang* community in specific and was mobilizing people to fight against caste discrimination and atrocities against Dalits, land rights for the landless, and other injustices meted out with marginalized communities. For people who have already been going through struggle within themselves, leadership like Adv. Eknath Awad, G S Dada Kamble, and Aatmaram Chandane greatly impacted those who became part of the Buddhist conversion movement.



Figure 4.4: The certificate issued to new converts after conversion.²⁹⁵

It was a turning point in the life of many. They had undergone various leadership training organized by the organizations led by these community leaders. They all believed in Ambedkarite

²⁹⁵ Picture re-produced with with permission from Dharmaraj Majamule.

ideology, which stands for liberty, equality, and fraternity. There was no scope for belief in any Gods. All the converts later issued a certificate confirming their Buddhist status. The certificates were distributed by the dignitaries present for the conversion ceremony (See Figure 4.4). Dignitaries such as Anandraj Ambedkar, Sandeep Upare, Bhante Upagupta Mahathero, G S Dada Kamble, and D S Narsinghe distributed the certificates by inviting every individual on the stage.

Amarsing Dhaka says that the act of conversion and doing it collectively was part of our assertion. He says we could have done that individually and privately, but converting publicly to a grand event had its importance. Our public announcement and assertion that we have converted will give others the courage and moral boost to do the same. Activists also problematize the argument that if one practices Buddhism in daily routine, why should one go for conversion? With the public announcement, there comes public responsibility as well. There is no scope for hiding behind anything when one announces and accepts something openly. Again, it is a conscious decision; therefore, there is no scope for compulsion. One must accept Buddhism without any external pressure or compulsion.

Bonding OBCs to the Anti-Caste movement and Buddhist Conversion through Phule's Satya Dharma

It has often been considered that Dalit Movement in Maharashtra is the movement of the ex-untouchable Caste *Mahar*. The conversion movement is also more or less dominated by Neo-Buddhists converted from the *Mahar* caste. As mentioned earlier in the third chapter, the non-Aryan theory proposed by Phule was deemphasized by Hindu nationalist forces. As a result, people belonging to service castes primarily categorized as OBC class preferred to identify themselves with Brahmanical culture. The non-Aryan concept was restricted to untouchables and tribals. However, though the anti-caste Dalit movement had very little participation from non-Dalits, some

individuals and organizations led by non-Dalits took part in the anti-caste social movement in Maharashtra. Individuals from non-Dalit castes were associated with Dr. Ambedkar and took an active part and responsibility in the struggles led by Ambedkar.

OBC leadership in Maharashtra, in general, and Beed, in particular, are currently attempting to reclaim that unity among non-Brahmin castes as envisioned by Phule by asserting their ethnic heritage and underlining historical contrasts between upper-caste and low-caste traditions. However, for a long time, there was no independent anti-caste movement among non-Dalits that openly took a stand against discriminatory caste structures in Hinduism. Nevertheless, in the recent past, OBCs in Maharashtra have started to work towards anti-caste ideology. There are well-organized and structured efforts from an organization such as *Satyashodhak OBC Parishad*, an OBC lead movement founded by the late Hanumant Upare and now led by his son Sandeep Upare in Maharashtra.

The *Satyashodhak OBC Parishad* is doing the herculean task of bringing OBC castes into the flow of the anti-caste movement and back to its roots, Buddhism. In 2011, Hanumant Upare announced his decision to leave Hinduism and convert to Buddhism. He also announced that he would convince around five lakh OBCs to renounce Hinduism. He announced that he would convert to Buddhism with another five lakh followers from the OBC community in 2016 at Deeksha Bhumi, Nagpur. For that purpose, he started organizing public meetings and rallies in different parts of Maharashtra. He visited different caste groups and addressed a public gathering to politicize and convince OBCs of Buddhist conversion (See Figure 4.5).

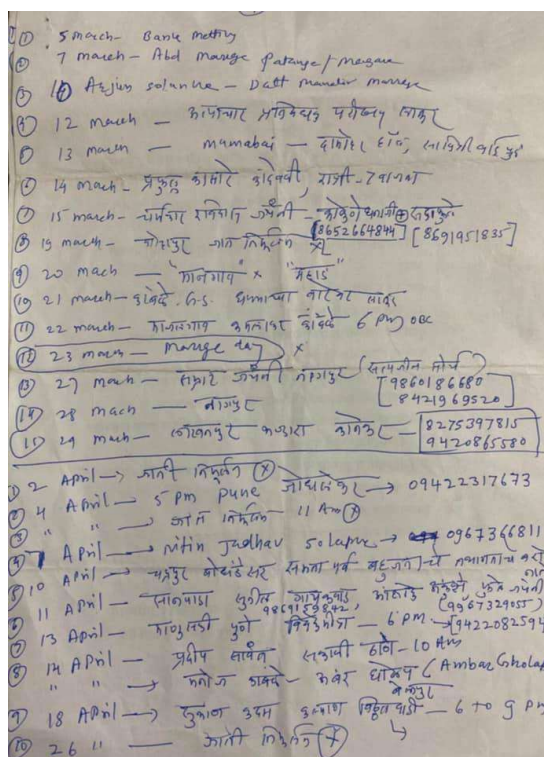


Figure 4.5: Hanumant Upare's schedule of public meetings and gatherings planned in March and April 1979.²⁹⁶

Hanumant Upare put Mahatma Phule's "theory of exploitation" into practice to mobilize OBCs. Mahatma Phule regarded Brahmins as exploiters because of their privileged status within the caste system and their legitimated monopoly on resources and knowledge, which allowed them to amass tremendous power. Brahmins were considered outsiders because they were thought to be the offspring of Aryan conquerors who had split the native population via caste (Omvedt, 1971).²⁹⁷ Upare connected cultural and ethnic reasons to the economic and political issues faced by OBCs. He believed that OBCs were indigenous to the area and were once Buddhists. Phule's Sarvajanic Satya dharma is the cornerstone of this movement. As Dr. Ambedkar claimed that Phule and Kabir

²⁹⁶ A handwritten piece found in Hanumant Upare's files of his schedule of public meetings he planned to attend. It is reproduced with permission from Sandeep Upare. Upare passed away midway on 19th March 2015.

²⁹⁷ Omvedt, Gail. (1971). Jotirao Phule and the ideology of social revolution in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 6, No. 37, pp. 1969-1979.

were his masters, activist missionaries further drew a connection between the two to popularize Dr. Ambedkar in the community.

Dr. Ambedkar's contribution to humanity in general and his sacrifices for OBC classes also play a significant role in missionary outreach in the OBC community. Though OBCs are an integral part of the Hindu religion, they have been excluded from a fair share of the resources and opportunities in the socio-economic and political spheres. Keeping their backwardness in mind, Dr. Ambedkar believed that based on social backwardness, a due share must be given to OBC castes by giving them fair representation in education and jobs through reserved seats for OBCs. The elite leadership of the country neglected it. Dr. Ambedkar cited his dissatisfaction with the government over the neglect of backward classes as one of the reasons for his resignation from the central ministry of Nehru's cabinet in 1951.

Activist missionaries in OBCs speak about Ambedkar's sacrifices for OBCs and highlight the fierce opposition from the oppressor caste during the implementation of Mandal recommendations to give 27% reservations to OBCs in education and jobs. Through this, activists further highlight the differences between the upper castes categorized as general and OBC castes and show them who are allies and who are against the interest of OBCs in India (See Figure 4.6). They also make them understand that anti-caste discourse in Maharashtra should be the OBCs movement, and they should actively participate in it.



Figure 4.6: Sandeep Upare speaks on the 'Chalo Buddha ki Aur' campaign on Ambedkar Jayanti at Ambejogai, Beed.²⁹⁸

The question here is why OBCs should not revive Phule's *Sarvajanik Satya dharma*. How will it help the OBCs to overcome the religious oppression of Brahmin slavery by joining Buddhism? If they want to ally with oppressed castes, what is the need for conversion to Buddhism? To these questions, activist missionary among OBCs argues that *Sarvajanik Satya dharma* emerged countering inequality and exploitation in Hinduism, the dominant religious tradition at the time of Phule. Phule was revolutionary in his approach toward orthodox religious beliefs and practices, but he never rejected the necessity of religion. Phule believed that even a revolutionary ideology and culture need a moral-religious base (Omvedt, 1971). Therefore, he founded a universalistic religion of "*Sarvajanik Satya dharma*." Like Buddha's Dhamma, Phule's *Satya dharma* was also rooted in principles of morality revolving around truth and rationality.

²⁹⁸ Picture reproduced with permission from Sandeep Upare. Also, present on the dais was G S Dada Kamble, president of SSM.

The purpose of religion for Phule was to unify men and women as equals, unlike Hinduism, which divides them into several castes and separate social groups. All these values are rooted in Buddha's Dhamma. Therefore, activists argue that though Phule's *Satya dharma* teaches us equality, it is restricted to the region and does not have a global connection. In comparison, Buddhism is a religion of global recognition offering a similar value system as that of *Satya dharma* offered by Phule. Then, it is always better to connect with a global community and form a broader alliance for an equal society than alienate ourselves into another group of similar values and vision. As Dr. Ambedkar believed, "Not only the people treated as Untouchables, but all people, irrespective of caste or religion, who believe in the teachings of the Buddha should participate in this Deeksha ceremony and embrace Buddhism."²⁹⁹

The political socialization and strategies of community leaders and activist missionaries resulted in non-*Mahar* communities starting to think beyond their castes and for the larger alliance of marginalized communities. The castes separated for thousands of years because the graded hierarchy is now reconnecting through Buddhism. Phule's *Satya dharma* became a connecting thread between Buddha's Dhamma and other marginalized castes, culminating in their conversion to Buddhism, rejecting the unequal status in caste-ridden Hindu society.

The proposed date of 14th October 2016 for the Buddhist conversion of Hanumant Upare and his followers was missed as one and half years before the proposed date Hanumant Upare breathed last. However, his family and followers took the baton of the '*Chalo Buddha ki Aur*'

²⁹⁹ Ambedkar, B.R. (2013:449). *I believe, my people will sacrifice everything to establish Buddhism in India*, Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part I.

mission in their hands and organized a grand conversion event on 25th November 2016, one month later than the proposed date.



Figure 4.7: Conversion Ceremony of Upare Family and thousands of OBC community members at Deeksha Bhumi, Nagpur.³⁰⁰

Thousands of OBCs and the entire family of Hanumant Upare converted to Buddhism in a public ceremony presided over by a revered monk Bhate Surai Sasai also known as Nagarjuna, organized at Deeksha Bhumi, Nagpur. Thousands of other Ambedkarite activists and leaders, such as Raja Dhale- the imminent writer and the leader of Dalit Panthers, and Jogendra Kawade- an RPI leader, were there to witness the historic event at Deeksha Bhumi. The second such event was organized by *Satyashodhak OBC Parishad* one year later in Mumbai on 25th November 2017. On 25th November 1927, Ambedkar, his associates, and the community burnt the *Manusmriti* at Mahad. Therefore, *Satyashodhak OBC Parishad* chose this date to renounce Hinduism and adopt Buddhism.

Gharwapasi: The homecoming of Indigenous Communities to Buddhism

Conversion to Buddhism in Maharashtra has been understood as protesting caste inequality and discrimination and adopting something equal and egalitarian. Since tribals and nomads are out of

³⁰⁰ Pictures re-produced with the permission from Sandeep Upare.

the purview of caste society, people see their conversion movement as they claim it is a blow to caste inequalities and discriminatory Hindu society as confusing. However, Buddhist conversion among Tribals and Nomadic community has a different approach. Laxman Mane argues that Buddha's sangha consists of wanderers searching for nirvana and were called *Parivrajaka*. Nomadic and Tribal communities in India were wanderers and never settled in one place. They were never part of any religion. They were following animism and had their totems.³⁰¹

As per Laxman Mane, conversion occurs when someone leaves one religion for another. However, since tribals and nomadic people are not part of any religion, technically, there is no possibility of conversion for tribals and nomadic communities. On the other hand, it is a homecoming for them. Nomads and tribals are returning to Buddhism, their original identity; therefore, they do not call it a conversion. Therefore, it is essential to look into the reasons for Tribal and Nomadic communities started to search for their roots and return to their original faith, as they claim, that is, Buddhism. One of the important reasons activists tell is that during and after colonial rule, when these Tribal and nomadic communities were brought under the direct control of the state and village societies, they were forced to assimilate with the village economic structure based on caste. It created conflict with the lifestyle and sources of survival of tribal and nomadic communities resulting in confrontation with the state and village societies. This conflict led to the categorization of these communities as notorious and criminal. Later colonial British government categorized and notified them as criminal tribes. This stigma has not gone even after the colonial

³⁰¹ See Javale, Arun. (2013). *Padagham: Sanskrutik Nishthhantarache*. Mumbai: Navata Books.

state left the country and India gained independence. They continued to be treated as criminals, and atrocities were inflicted on them.



Figure 4.8: Leaflet advertising workshop presided over by Laxman Mane, organized by *Coordination Committee of Nomadic tribes, OBC, SC, and ST, Beed.*

Laxman Mane at Samajik Nyay Bhavan, Beed, while addressing the gathering at the workshop organized by the *Coordination Committee of Nomadic tribes, OBC, SC, and ST, Beed* highlighted the negligible representation of Nomadic and Tribal communities in education, jobs, and political positions in various institutions (See Figure 4.8). Owing to the scattered population and wandering nature, the nomadic and tribal communities even lack essential identification documentation. All these cumulatively affect them and make them the most vulnerable communities in contemporary society. Activists point out the apathy among public representatives and administration in catering to the need and requirements of the community.

Though tribals and nomads are not part of a caste society, they are affected by caste hegemonies and the casteist mindset of ruling classes. The indifferent nature of caste society towards most marginalized communities pushed them to the corner so much that they felt the need to mobilize against the Hindu mindset of the state and protest it through religious mobilization and

conversion to Buddhism. In particular, they draw inspiration from the *Mahar* community and Ambedkar's anti-caste movement. Laxman Mane says *Mahars* were also discriminated against and pushed to the corner as untouchables. However, today, after the Brahmins, the most educated community in Maharashtra is *Mahars*. Mane says the significant difference between other ex-untouchable castes and *Mahars* in terms of the progress they have achieved in a short period is the latter's rejection of Hinduism and conversion to Buddhism. Mane gives credit to Buddhist conversion for advancing the *Mahar* community on the socio-economic and educational front, as Buddhism gave them a new vision and ideals. That made a huge difference in their psychological approach and self-belief.

Mane mentions one of his observations about how the places of worship and medium of entertainment for *Mahars* have changed post-conversion. He quotes the popular perception about *Mahars* that books became costly as untouchable *Mahars* started reading and meat became costly because Brahmins started eating it. He highlighted the demand and supply logic in the raising prices of books and meat. The demand increased for books as the untouchable communities were previously banned from schooling, and education earned access to education and developed an interest in reading. It also reflects in the everyday practice of Buddhist households and culture. In the event where the Buddhist community gathers in large numbers, you can notice the number of Book stalls and people buying books as their way of expressing gratitude to Babasaheb Ambedkar and Buddha. Whether it is a small or big gathering of cultural event or religious gathering of Buddhist communities in Maharashtra, the number of books sold during that period is a sign of change.

On the question of how the activist missionary working with Tribal and Nomadic communities managed to convince the people and make them participate in the Buddhist conversion movement, Laxman Mane says,

*"I did not have to make much effort as I just had to remove the dust/ashes from the burning charcoal. Burning the fire out of fresh wood takes time, but burning charcoal catches fire in no time. The same is the case with Nomadic and Tribal communities. We have our way of life, which is close to the Buddhist way of life. You will understand many similarities with Buddhist traditions if you closely observe our traditions. Our values are similar to that of Buddhist values and not of Hindus. So invoking the traditional similarities with Buddhism was an easy task. So it was easy for us to convince our people that we are Buddhist and must reclaim our original identity as Buddhists."*³⁰²

Laxman Mane further says Nomads used to wander in the forest and collect food as per requirements. Even when they came in contact with village society, they used to beg and collect food from the households. Buddhist monks also collected food for their survival. Accepting whatever is offered in *bhiksha* is Buddhist culture. Monks never stored anything for themselves. Nomads also never collected any property for themselves. They kept moving from village to village, and while leaving one place to another, they buried the remaining food collected in the village. They never used to carry anything with them from where they were living.

³⁰² Mane, Laxman. (2020, June 26). Facebook Live video of Laxman Mane streamed on 'Matang, Charmakar, and OBC- Chalo Buddha ki Aur' Facebook page. <https://www.facebook.com/100003182016684/videos/3092112174238153/> Accessed on 3rd July 2020.

Prof. Vishnu Jadhav, one of the activist missionaries working with Laxman Mane and active in the Beed district, recalls what Mane tells them about the connection between Buddhist traditions and the Nomadic lifestyle. Prof. Jadhav says,

*"The full moon day has great importance in the nomadic culture. In Buddhism, many important events in the life of Buddha happened on the full moon days. Kids born in the nomadic community have to undergo certain rituals. Rituals such as the name-giving ceremony happen on the full moon day that comes on Holi Purnima. All the kids born before Purnima are named on that day. The elderly member of the community name the kids in a public ceremony and accept them as a member of the community. After the ceremony, elders remove the hair of the kid. It is similar to the conversion of monks to the Buddha's sangha, as the monk removes hair after entering the sangha. Similarly, the nomadic community accepts the new member of the community in the name-giving ceremony and removes the hair of the new member. Therefore, Laxman Mane said that nomadic communities are closely related to Buddhist traditions."*³⁰³

He further said that during the decline of Buddhism in India, when Buddhism was under attack, Buddhist monks and others took shelter in the forest to protect themselves from the attacks. They ended up living in forests and losing contact with villages. Eventually, they lost their connection with Buddhist identity and continued to live as wanderers. Therefore, now these communities are reclaiming their lost identity as Buddhists through conversion. Laxman Mane and a few colleagues took Deeksha of Buddhism on 14th October 2006 at Deeksha Bhumi, Nagpur. Further, he gave

³⁰³ Interview with Prof Vishnu Jadhav on 5th May 2018.

Buddhist Deeksha to thousands of his followers at a mass conversion event organized at Mahalaxmi Racecourse Ground in Mumbai on 27th May 2007 (See Figure 4.9).



Figure 4.9: Buddhist Conversion Ceremony under the leadership of Laxman Mane at Mahalaxmi Racecourse Ground, Mumbai.³⁰⁴

Conclusion:

For a long time, non-*Mahar* castes were not part of the conversion movement, but after the activist missionaries began mobilizing and politically socializing non-*Mahar* castes, they got organized. This chapter has dealt with the emergence of spontaneous leadership as an activist missionary and anti-caste movement in organizing non-*Mahar* communities, which took on responsibility for bringing their communities into the fold of Buddhism through various strategies and means for reaching out to the masses. The ethnicization of caste is one of the key tactics activists used in mobilizing and politicizing individuals across caste lines. The missionary activists in the conversion movement have come from organizations led by anti-caste leaders such as Eknath Awad, Hanumant Upare, GS Dada Kamble, and Aatmaram Chandane. Organizations such as *Satyashodhak Samaj Mahasangha* (SSM) and *Satyashodhak OBC Parishad* (SOP) are doing full-

³⁰⁴ Picture reproduced from Twitter shared by Adv Disha Wadekar.

time missionary work among non-Mahar SC castes and OBC castes, respectively, have a more significant impact on communities.

Through the process of political socialization, organized efforts are being taken by activist missionaries to problematize the caste, and mobilizations are happening around the experiences of discrimination faced by communities that have a base in their cultural and social identity of castes. Though various organizations and individual leaders autonomously work among communities, a natural bonding and robust connection binds them together and works for a common goal of taking Buddhism to the lay masses. They stand with and for each other in the process of social movements. Thorat (2008:168)³⁰⁵ argues that the exclusion of social groups has been associated with individuals' cultural and social identities.

Though the experience of exclusion and caste discrimination for every caste group is different, their experience of group exclusion in a caste society binds them together and brings them to Buddhism. Communities that have been excluded or have benefited only partially from social and economic development are now seeking solutions for their group-specific problems. The religious rejection of Hinduism and conversion to Buddhism has been one of the solutions found by various new groups operating in this Background.

Different caste groups in politicization and conversion to Buddhism share common goals and experiences. Furthermore, they invented their traditions. Efforts were made to give a concrete shape to this collective identity by creating myths and heroes and by using a variety of symbols, verbal and non-verbal. The next chapter will address this important event as forming a community

³⁰⁵ Thorat, Sukhadeo. (2008). Social Exclusion in the Indian Context: Theoretical Basis of Inclusive Policies. *Indian Journal of Human Development*, Vol.2. No.1, 2008. Pp. 165-181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0973703020080108>

and using different strategies to unify the caste and form a collective group within the fold of Buddhism to fight against caste oppression based on their shared experience.

Chapter Five

Buddhism in Practice: The challenge of confronting caste and reconstructing society

“It was vain to attempt to escape from the world. There is no escape from the world even for an ascetic. He (Buddha) realized that what is necessary is not escape from the world. What is necessary is to change the world and to make it better.”

(Ambedkar, 1992:112)³⁰⁶

Introduction:

The previous chapter covered the formation process of activist missionaries who devoted themselves to the cause of reaching out to communities in their respective capacities and making them realize caste is the major hurdle in their way. Activist Missionaries made the people consciously think about their status within the caste hierarchy compared with the upper castes of the same religion through their individual and organizational affiliations. They provoke the marginalized communities to think about who pushed them into the caste hierarchy. Activist missionaries exposed the false identity of oppressed castes' Hinduism through the ethnicization of caste. They believe that rejecting caste and embracing Buddhism's egalitarian worldview through conversion to Buddhism is the best way to address the caste issue. However, after overcoming the hurdle of the ritual conversion, the real battle for recently converted Buddhists begins. Therefore, this chapter looked at how the converted Buddhists' thoughts, beliefs, and actions led to the reconstruction of the society from the perspective of caste annihilation and how it reflected in the

³⁰⁶ Ambedkar, B.R. (1992:112). *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, In Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol.11.

anti-caste movement from different directions. Challenging the dominant/hegemonic culture based on caste is a separate struggle that new converts fight daily. The role of individual change and system change is unique in any movement which aims for social change through protesting caste and the inequalities it sustains. As scholars have positioned Buddhism as anti-caste, it is also assumed that it challenges the gender-based discrimination embedded in Brahmanical patriarchy. Therefore, it liberates women followers from oppression.

In this context, it is essential to see how the issue of inequality and discrimination based on gender is dealt with in Buddhism. Because Buddhism promotes equality as a fundamental value for human existence, this chapter will also examine the question of women's liberation through Buddhism, focusing on the caste dominance that oppressed identities have to contend with. It will also highlight their struggle against this dominance and how they do so through Buddhism. This chapter narrates the experiences of Buddhist women about breaking the caste boundaries and record their experiences of changes Buddhism brought into their life and the society they live. It further looked at how the converted Buddhists' thoughts, beliefs, and actions led to the reconstruction of the community from the perspective of caste annihilation and how it reflected in anti-caste movements from different directions.

The Buddhist counter-culture: Alternative to Caste culture

For new converts, after going through conversion rituals, the real challenge is to give up the caste identity and its practices. Many families have undergone conversion rituals, but some still follow practices associated with their castes. Merely converting to Buddhism will not ensure equality, particularly considering that caste is a structure of graded inequity. There is no meaning for such conversion until it reflects in their daily living. Therefore, rejecting old identities, cultures, and

traditions associated with them is integral to becoming a Buddhist. Conversion to Buddhism, which rejects the degradation of humanity and exploitation of the marginalized castes, is significant as new converts of Buddhism contest this caste domination by leaving oppressive religious traditions and culture. To solve this issue, Dr. Ambedkar provided detailed instructions, and he expected Buddhist converts to adhere to them. One of the most important expectations from the new converts is that they renounce Hinduism and its customs. The second requirement is to uphold Buddhist values and adhere to Buddhist principles.

Therefore, Buddhists affirm their identity as Buddhists without feeling hierarchy and hold that they do not belong to a caste and hold the societal ideals of equality and humanity. The Buddhist lifeworld is founded on reason and atheism, and morality replaces God in Buddhism (Zelliot, 1992:195).³⁰⁷ Families have abandoned traditional Hindu customs, including worshipping their gods, participating in festivals, and performing life cycle rites. Some families had already ceased performing Hindu religious ceremonies and rituals and had begun conducting daily life in a Buddhist manner.

The rejection of culture and tradition left a vast vacuum, and the old traditions and practices keep popping up in every walk of life. Therefore, the creation of alternative approaches and cultures based on the principles of Buddhism became a priority for the new converts. As Uma Chakravarti (2004:200) strongly believes, “It (Buddhist conversion) represents the search for a code of ethics and a large culture that can provide everyone with dignity and can, therefore, fill a

³⁰⁷ Zelliot, Eleanor. (1992:195). *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*. New Delhi: Manohar Publication.

crucial vacuum in the life of those who adopt Buddhism.”³⁰⁸ However, for Buddhists, what constitutes living like Buddhists in daily life? Two major fields of ritualistic activities of newly converted Buddhists are rites of passage and festively paying homage. Therefore, it is necessary to examine Buddhism's teachings and belief systems against the practices, usages, rituals, observances, and everyday activities of religious communities.

Non-Mahar Buddhists and changes in ritualistic practices:

Religious rituals are integral to community life, and various rituals have been observed for extended periods. Therefore, it has created space in the daily life of the community. Changing or rejecting it significantly impacts an individual's personal and public life in a community. Often, families have faced boycotts for not adhering to ritualistic life and challenging it. Activist missionaries are aware of this fact and are cautious while dealing with the ceremonial life world of the community. Like the conversion decision not directly introduced to the community, activist missionaries slowly brought ritualistic changes into the discussion.

Similarly, interlocutors also have preferences while deciding about their religious lifeworld. The individuals who are in the process of change and Buddhist conversion prefer to slowly change their day-to-day life by changing religious and ceremonial practices and then go for conversion. Some interlocutors discussed in previous chapters believe that one must first convert. Change into formal practices serves as a base to launch the conversion movement as the final blow. By this, they aim at generating external support from the converted community as the threat of exclusion and boycott from their kins and kith and the larger religious community always looms

³⁰⁸ Chakravarti, Uma. (2004:200). Is Buddhism the Answer to Brahmanical Patriarchy? In Jondhale, Surendra and Beltz, Johannes (eds), *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. Pp. 186-202.

on the new converts. Therefore, the choice of ritualistic changes and preference for conversion over practices is more individualistic than standardized.

Sarvajanik Satya Dharma way:

For those who look for slow changes in their practices and then go for conversion, *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma* plays a vital link as it adheres to the reformative aspect of Hinduism. It rejects the Brahmin supremacy in the ceremonial life of individuals. Therefore, it becomes the stepping stone in rejecting rituals dominated by Brahmin hegemony. It also connects Buddhism and the individual. In the case of Upare's family, his son's marriage happened according to the *Satyashodhak* rituals of marriage before their conversion to Buddhism. Later, his entire family got converted to Buddhism. Though Hanumant Upare did not get enough time to achieve his desire to convert to Buddhism, his last rites were performed as per Buddhist rituals. In this regard, *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma* and *Satyashodhak* Rituals are essential stages in the Buddhist conversion movement and ritualistic change in the life of individuals in the anti-caste direction.

One such wedding happened during fieldwork that was going to be performed as per the *Satyashodhak* way of rituals in the *Matang* community. Eknath Mhaske, a newly converted Buddhist who belonged to the *Matang* caste from Patrud village, invited the researcher to the wedding. The bride's family is his relative. Since the researcher interviewed him, he knew about the purpose and objective of the research. Therefore, he invited the researcher to the wedding and introduced him to Ashok Dhage, an activist from the Majalgaon and the bride's uncle. It was observed that the family had not converted to Buddhism yet. However, they are on the path of conversion. Slowly and gradually, they are coming out of Hinduism and adopting the anti-caste way of life.

This wedding ceremony was important to attend because it was not the typical wedding, as Vedic rituals were not part of it. It was called '*Satyashodhak Mangal Parinay*.' Mahatma Phule's *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma* gave *Satyashodhak wedding* rituals, and Ambedkar gave the Buddhist community their wedding ceremonies called *Mangal Parinay*. Both wedding rituals are non-Vedic and do not need a Brahmin priest. Therefore, in its terminology, '*Satyashodhak Mangal Parinay*' is a fusion of Phule's *Satya Dharma* and Buddhism given by Ambedkar. The family wanted to provide alternative options and reject Brahmin supremacy in the formal affairs of individuals. It was a radical change as most marriages in the *Matang* caste still happen as per Vedic rituals in the presence of a Brahmin priest.

When it comes to observance of life cycle rituals of important events like marriage and death, people become more conscious about their traditions. Often, pressure from their community does not allow them to go against the traditionally practiced community rituals. There is always a possibility of rejection and even boycotts by own community members for going against traditions. Therefore, rejecting Vedic rituals and accepting the *Satyashodhak* way of performing the wedding ritual for a *Matang* family in a small village is a massive step. Such a brave family decision in a remote village also shows that anti-caste ideas and thoughts are reaching remotely located places like this.

The bride's family had erected a mandap and decorated it with colorful curtains and flowers with the Bride and Groom's names written in the background of the stage. The stage was adorned with images of social revolutionaries such as Mahatma Phule, Savitribai Phule, Shivaji Maharaj, Shahu Maharaj, Dr. Ambedkar, and Anna Bhau Sathe (See Figure 5.1). Such a sight in a wedding ceremony is not common in non-*Mahar* wedding ceremonies. Images of social revolutionaries at

a wedding ceremony signify the beginning of the revolt against Vedic religion and the supremacy of priestly castes dominating communities' ritualistic lifeworld.



Figure 5.1: Saryashodhak Wedding Ceremony stage. (Photo by Author)

The singing program of *Shahir-* was also organized at the wedding venue. Singers were singing revolutionary songs about Anna Bhau Sathe, Buddha, and Ambedkar. They praised Anna Bhau and Ambedkar through their songs. Their songs also reminded the audiences about the sacrifices these leaders have made to give a dignified life to oppressed communities. The troupe of singers and musicians was performing with very minimal resources. They were four people in a troupe, one singer, one harmonium player, one *dholaki*³⁰⁹ player, and one chorus singer.

After their program, there was interaction with the troupe's members, which revealed that they do not get to perform frequently. It is on such occasions and seasons that they get singing offers. Otherwise, they work as daily wage laborers to earn their livelihood while not singing. Life is difficult for them. Despite this, they continue to sing and work for the anti-caste movement out of sheer passion. There has been a long history of public performances of songs and narratives

³⁰⁹ Cylinder type drum with a leather-made surface on both sides.

associated with the anti-caste singing tradition. It has significantly contributed to sustaining and spreading the anti-caste movement across the state.

Another significant thing noticed at the venue was the *Halgi*³¹⁰ troupe. The instrument is played exclusively by the *Matang* caste during religious rituals, temple festivals, ceremonies, processions, and other auspicious occasions. It is also performed in dance and for entertainment purposes. It is the caste occupation of *Matangs* to play the *halgi* in such events. Their religious duty is also to serve on such occasions without monetary compensation. Caste atrocities are still inflicted upon them by the upper caste for refusing to perform their caste duty of beating *halgi* in religious rituals.



Figure 5.2: *Halgi* troupe playing the instrument in the wedding ceremony.

(Photo by Author)

Contrary to caste duty, the *halgi* troupe performed at the wedding to celebrate it. It was another form of assertion and an attempt to give a different meaning to *halgi* that was considered polluted and untouchable as it was a caste occupation of *Matang*. Works related to leather were considered filthy, and castes engaged in those occupations were deemed untouchables. It is also a

³¹⁰ *Halgi* is a musical instrument made up of a circular wooden or metal frame with one end closed with cow skin membrane and the other end open. *Halgi* is played with two sticks, one being larger and thinner than the other.

recent phenomenon that *halgi* troupes perform their art as professionals and charge money for the same. However, the tradition of *Matang* people playing *halgi* in religious rituals and ceremonies continues. Some *Matang* families in villages; continue to perform their caste duties of beating *halgi* on all occasions.

In wedding rituals, the bridegroom must take the blessings of God Hanuman/Maruti before proceeding to the wedding venue. Every village has a Maruti temple, and bride groom must visit the Maruti temple of the village where the wedding rituals are going to happen. Groom is supposed to wear his wedding clothes after receiving the blessings of God Maruti. God Maruti is considered a God of unmarried men. Therefore, it is prohibited for women to enter the Maruti temple. Ironically it is also not allowed for untouchables to enter to Maruti temple. Therefore, receiving Maruti's blessing before was not part of the tradition followed by ex-untouchable castes.

However, it is now allowed for everyone to enter the temples after penalizing the act of restricting untouchables from temple entry. However, cases of atrocities get reported where people from ex-untouchable castes, those who recently adopted the practice of visiting the temples for blessing before marriage, were restricted from temple entry and were assaulted for entering the temple. Therefore, weddings performed through *Satyashodhak* did not follow the tradition of seeking blessings of the village deity Maruti before the wedding ritual. Thus, the elder in the family handed over the wedding clothes of the groom and bride.

Muhurt is an auspicious day and time recommended by Brahmin astrologers to perform important rituals such as a wedding. It is the belief among the community that not every day and time of the day is *shubha*- auspicious, there is a particular time to perform certain rituals, and there is also a wrong time to be avoided for performing certain rituals. The belief is that if one performs

certain rituals or activities considered important in life at an auspicious time suggested by an astrologer, there will not be any problem or difficulty in the rituals or function.

At the *Satyashodhak* wedding, both families decided on the time without consulting the astrologer. They fix the time to avoid confusion for guests who wish to attend the wedding. They did not consult the astrologer to determine the wedding time. The person who came to solemnize the wedding ritual expressed his happiness and acknowledged both families for taking the brave step to go against oppressive traditional practices and deciding to perform the wedding through the *Satyashodhak* rituals. There is no specification about who can preside over the wedding, and anyone who can read or know by heart the verses that need to be recited during the wedding ritual can preside over the wedding.

Since there is no such concept of auspicious time, people take their own time to get ready and even pass the decided time of the wedding. The presiding person of the marriage also urged everyone to respect each other's time as the bride and groom came to the stage with a delay of a couple of hours. After the couple reached on stage, the presiding person introduced the bride and bridegroom to the people at the venue. He then invited the bride and groom's parents on the stage to garland the images of social revolutionaries kept on the scene. After that, he asked the bride and groom for their consent to the marriage. With permission, he asked both to put garlands to the images of social revolutionaries kept on stage. Then they were asked to sit on the chairs specially decorated for the wedding.

Meanwhile, flower petals were distributed to every single person present there at the venue. People gently throw flower petals on the bride and groom at the end of every verse recited during the ceremony. There were five verses recited, and after the fourth verse bride and groom exchanged

the garlands given to them; first, the bride garlanded the groom, and then the groom garlanded the bride. After the fifth verse, people clapped, and musicians played music with *halgi*. It was a simple ritual that everyone could follow.

Vedic rituals happen in Sanskrit, and a large community remains unaware of what is being recited by priests. However, the verses recited at the *Satyashodhak* wedding were in the Prakrit-Marathi language. The verses recited were about the duties of the bride and groom towards each other and society. It is advised to the bride and groom to recite the verses on their own. However, not everyone can do that, so Phule also suggested that the friends and relatives of the bride and groom can help them recite it.³¹¹ Ultimately, both must take an oath to accept each other as lawful husband and wife and promise to remain loyal to each other.

Families and relatives of the bride and groom attended the wedding. There were special guests for the wedding invited by both families. These special guests were mainly from Dalit social and political movements working at the local level. Some well-known social activists and political leaders from the Dalit movement were in attendance. Mrs. Gayabai Awad was the chief guest at the wedding. Gayabai Awad is the wife of the late Eknath Awad- founder and president of Manavi Hakka Abhiyan (MHA). Gayabai Awad was also an elected representative in the District Council- a local government at the district level in the Panchayati Raj system. District president of MHA- Raju Ghode, also came to attend the wedding with Gayabai. Ajinkya Chandane, another influential Dalit leader in Beed district, was also there at the wedding along with his party members and supporters of the Democratic Party of India from the Marathwada region (See Figure 5.3). Other

³¹¹ See Jotirao, Phule. (2006). *Mahatma Phule Samagra Vangmaya*. Maharashtra State Sahitya ani Sanskruti Mandal, Mumbai. Edited by Keer, Dhananjay; Malashe, S.G; Phadake, Yashavanta.

office bearers from Dalit political parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party, Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi, and Republican Party of India, and activists who attended the wedding.



Figure 5.3: Ajinkya Chandane (Fourth from right), DPI party members, and bride and groom at the Satyashodhak wedding ceremony. (Photo by Author)

Significantly few women social activists and leaders attended the wedding. Most of the guests were male. They were honored with garland and a Pheta (traditional Maharashtrian turban) by the elderly members of the family. The presence of renowned personalities and leaders from social and political movements at weddings is regarded as an honor. Family members talked about how their relatives, community members, and activists supported their family in organizing the wedding in a *Satyashodhak* way.

There are examples where community people did not come in support and sometimes boycotted the wedding because families did not follow traditional Vedic rituals in weddings. Some community members are still unwilling to give up Brahmanical rites and must agree with community members working towards change. In such situations, community leaders and activists attending such events boost the community's morale. Activists say they must participate in such events and promote them in the community. They believe rejecting Brahmanical rituals and

adopting non-Brahmanical traditions should become a popular culture among the oppressed community. It requires more extensive community participation to make this happen.

Shubhash Lonke, DPI district president, who was also in attendance at the wedding, believed the acceptance level of people would gradually increase, and it would become popular culture if they got support from everyone. Therefore, the venue of anti-caste wedding ceremonies also becomes a place for meeting the movement's activists and leaders. Many of the leaders and activists we previously spoke with attended the wedding. I ran into them again there. My presence at the wedding made them joyful. There, I was introduced to Ajinkya Chandane's party members and supporters. There, I could make more connections and discover individuals and families actively promoting Buddhist conversion within the Matang community.

The influence of Buddhist values on changes brought in by non-*Mahar* communities in Death Rites:

Regarding Buddhist rituals, there are no rigid rules to follow. However, Ambedkar gave the people a set of standard practices to avoid confusion in lifecycle rites. Even though everyone is subject to adhere to it, there is no tight control over individuals. They can introduce or even make changes in the ceremonies they follow. Buddhist institutions like the *Bharatiya Bauddha Mahasabha*- The Buddhist Society of India, founded by Dr. Ambedkar, facilitate the communities in observing Buddhist rituals and regulate the training and functioning of the Buddhist community at the local level.

Lifecycle rituals are a significant part of an individual's religious life and an assertion of one's belief. The community also fears altering the rites that have been followed for centuries. Due to the fear of exclusion, even though people who died wished to arrange their last rites as per

Buddhist tradition, families sometimes opt out and perform non-Buddhist rituals. To avoid this insult Dr. Digambar Bobade, who has converted from the OBC Mali caste to Buddhism, has drafted his will. He has laid down the details of how his last rites must be performed in his will. Abiding by the will is mandatory by law; otherwise, his heirs may lose rights over cremating his dead body. He wished his body would be handed over to the Buddhist Society of India to perform final rites as per Buddhist tradition if his family thought otherwise.

Some families go on to follow Buddhist rituals and do not nudge the fear created by the community. Dhimant Rashtrapal, whose father passed away recently. He had converted to Buddhism from the *Matang* community and is practicing Buddhism. Therefore, he did not follow Hindu rituals at the time of cremation. He consciously avoided traditions such as carrying fire in an earthen pot to the cremation ground, keeping gold in the deceased's mouth, and throwing coins while taking the dead body to the cremation ground. Instead, he followed Buddhist rituals.

As per tradition, it is mandatory to wait for a crow to come and touch the offering after collecting ashes from the place of cremation. Hindus believe that if a crow does not touch the offering, it means there are some unfulfilled wishes of the deceased, which families should promise to fulfill. So, family members of the deceased promise to fulfill those wishes and pray to crow to touch the ashes. Dhimant Rashtrapal did not wait for a crow and collected his father's ashes. Instead, he invited Buddhist *Bhante* to perform death rituals. When the last rites happen by cremation, families dissolve ashes that remain after cremation in running water. If one fails to do so, it is believed that the deceased person's soul does not get salvation.

Contrary to this belief, Dhimant buried his father's remaining ashes in the agriculture field they owned. He dug three pits, poured ashes into three holes, and planted three trees. In the first

pit, he planted a peepal tree sapling (Boddhi Vruksh); the tree underneath Buddha attained enlightenment; in the second one, he planted a banyan tree; in the third one, he planted a mango tree. It has been three years since his father passed away, and all these trees are there growing and contributing to nature. His relatives and community people opposed him, but they could not do much. Dhimant says,

“It was my father who had passed away, and my family was with me in this, so I had all the right to decide how I would do the death rituals. They continued to scar me, saying you are going against our traditions, which may affect your family. You have two daughters, and if you go against community norms and religion, no one will marry them, and they may also outcast your family. I did not budge from their threats. I was not doing anything wrong. Therefore, there was no reason for me to get scared of them. I am doing everything out of no external pressure. I am doing it because it appeals to my conscience. I am not scared of anything now. My relatives and people from the Matang community used to say that I was pretending to live like the Mahar caste. Since they know my family and I have stopped celebrating Hindu festivals and rituals, people from my community deliberately invite us to their religious sacrificial ceremonies where they sacrifice a goat for God. We do not participate in such ceremonies. I was not particularly eager to go to such events because it is superstitious to do such things, and I am against it. Those who organize such events do not have toilets in their houses. They do not have shelves for books in their house. Their kids do not get books to study, but they spend their hard-earned money on nonsensical sacrifices. One goat cost them around five to six

thousand rupees minimum. People sacrifice two to three goats together. Think about the cost incurred on same and tradeoffs they do.”³¹²

The threat is real, and people have faced difficulties due to violating community norms. One such incident happened when the family belonging to the *Matang* community had arranged his son’s naming ceremony. The father had made the special arrangements and placed loudspeakers to play music as it was a time of celebration for the family. The Ambedkarite movement influenced the family, and they converted to Buddhism in 2006. Therefore, songs played on the loudspeaker were from Ambedkarite culture. One of the songs played was “तुम्ही खाता त्या भाकरीवर, बाबासाहेबांची सही हाय र.” Roughly translated as “There is Babasaheb’s signature on the bread you eat.”

This song provoked the community he belonged to as the music reminded the marginalized community about the contribution of Ambedkar to the right to live with dignity. The pre-existing hatred got triggered, and people started telling each other that he was playing *Mahar's* song, so no one wanted to go to his function. Everyone warned their wives not to go for baby naming because it was primarily a women’s event. A naming ceremony was conducted in the presence of guests without the local community's participation after waiting until midnight.

Two months later, when his mother passed away, his community remained indifferent, keeping a grudge against him for his bold Ambedkarite ideas. He was horrified by the treatment he received from his people. Ideally, the local community arranges funeral rites. However, even after relatives gathered at his place for the last rites, there was no local community participation in

³¹² Interview with Dhimant Rashtrapal on 9th May 2018.

preparing the last rites. Since he was Ambedkarite, he had friends from the Ambedkarite circle. Finally, the Buddhist-Ambedkarite community came forward and arranged his mother's funeral.

Again, at the time of the condolence meeting, the family had organized Bhajan and Bhim Geet (Ambedkarite Songs) program. The local community pelted stones at them, hiding behind the night. One of the elders from the gathering announced on the loudspeaker that if they did not stop, the family would approach the police and file a complaint against the miscreants. However, he never confronted anyone personally for this humiliation he faced. He was saddened; why should such a thing happen first place? However, he believed those who inflicted pain on him were slaves of the Brahmanical culture. Buddha's principles and teachings have inspired him; therefore, there is no defeat he can see in his life when it comes to believing and standing up for the ideology.

Buddhism in India came after Brahmanical culture as a revolutionary culture to the oppressive Brahminical Vedic religion at the time of Buddha (Omvedt, 2011, p. 53-54).³¹³ Even at its revival, it emerged as an alternative to the counter-revolution of Hinduism in India when Dr. Ambedkar led the conversion movement to Buddhism. However, religious conversion is considered a defiance of caste expectations. The community members socially ostracized those who converted to Buddhism (Gokhale, 1986).³¹⁴ Despite facing the wrath of upper castes for defying caste conventions and daring to convert to Buddhism, the Mahar caste never encountered any internal caste opposition because most of their fellow caste members collectively participated in the conversion.

³¹³ Omvedt, Gail. (2011). *Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond*. Hyderabad: Orient Black Swan.

³¹⁴ Gokhale, Jayashree. (1986). The Sociopolitical Effects of Ideological Change: The Buddhist Conversion of Maharashtrian Untouchables, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 2, (Feb. 1986), pp. 269-292.

The same was not the case with other non-*Mahar* castes. They have a split opinion about conversion among them. Therefore, mass conversion events among non-*Mahar* castes did not fetch them attributable recognition as Buddhists like *Mahar*. It was restricted to individuals who converted from non-*Mahar* castes and not to everyone in the community they represented. They had to earn it through a rigorous resilient fight on a day-to-day basis. Given the graded structure of caste hierarchy, there is still a feeling of hostility and hatred among low castes. It requires efforts to reduce the hostility among them for the actualizing collective social emancipation of the masses. Ambedkar Jayanti has played a significant role in bridging that vacuum in the community space and offered the platform for the communities to come together.

Ambedkar Jayanti: Steppingstone in establishing an identity that bonds communities together as Buddhists

As Prof. Roberson Smith (Quoted in Ambedkar, 2016, p. 416-17)³¹⁵ said that “in a community, the social body is made not of men only, but of gods and men, and therefore any stranger who wants to enter a community and forge a bond of kinship can do so only by accepting the God or Gods of the community.” Non-*Mahar* castes, those who stayed away from conversion, tried to forge a bond with upper castes by siding with them. They also started following Brahmanical ritualistic life and the Gods in their day-to-day routine. It was also quite spontaneous from low castes that they continued to follow their old religion as many subaltern deities followed by them got appropriated and eventually became part of it.

Attempts were also made to claim Buddha as the incarnation of Vishnu- a Hindu God, so it could be easy to appropriate and include Buddhists in the Hindu fold. However, Buddhists

³¹⁵ Ambedkar, B.R. (2016:416-17). Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 5.

countered this claim and confronted it by highlighting Buddha's take on God. Ambedkar took cognizance of this mischievous propaganda and addressed it through the vows administered to newly converted Buddhists during the conversion ceremony. He included an oath that says, "I do not and shall not believe that Lord Buddha was the incarnation of Vishnu. I believe this to be sheer madness and false propaganda."³¹⁶

Buddhists reject God's existence, replacing it with morality. Therefore, there is no scope for making Buddha himself a God. In this context, following Buddha and his teachings based on morality became the common ground for Buddhists to get connected as a Buddhist religious community. Similarly, celebrating Ambedkar Jayanti became one of the essentials to becoming Ambedkarite. The *Mahar* community started to celebrate Ambedkar Jayanti, and it was rare to see non-*Mahars* even as participants in Ambedkar Jayanti celebrations. In such situations, the non-*Mahar* community celebrating Ambedkar Jayanti was no less than a revolution. Ambedkar Jayanti was a factor for communities to connect and bond. Ambedkar and Buddha replaced the place of God for the Buddhist community (Waghmore, 2013:121).³¹⁷

These festive celebrations are not for pleasing Buddha or Ambedkar as the religious figure in expectations of some material gain. These are strictly limited to paying tribute and remembering their contribution to society. Through this, they claim a distinct socio-religious identity and contest the cultural domination of oppressor castes. Buddhists invested their time and energy in reconstructing and reimagining their past. There was a time when Buddhist heritage in various forms did not have anyone to claim it assertively as their heritage as a common mass. However,

³¹⁶ Omvedt, Gail. (2003: 261-262). *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste*. New Delhi: Sage.

³¹⁷ Waghmore, Suryakant. (2013). *Civility against Caste: Dalit Politics and Citizenship in Western India*, New Delhi, Sage Publication.

post-Ambedkar's conversion movement, Buddhists in Maharashtra have started claiming that heritage and reconstructing Buddhism's forgotten history in India.

Ambedkar Jayanti is the biggest platform for the Ambedkarite communities to bond over celebrations. Beed has evolved a unique way of celebrating Ambedkar Jayanti. From the selection of the organizing committee to the collection of funds to a single platform of celebration at a district place to a one-time procession through Beed town, every activity is unique and has thoughtfulness behind things. The celebration of Ambedkar Jayanti has come a long way from the emotional moment of the community, which never had a dignified way of celebrating their heroes, to the conscious level using these platforms for political socialization of the communities and forging the bonds between castes separated for ages. Therefore, by associating with Ambedkar and his ideas, one can bond with each other as Ambedkar's followers, even if they come from different castes.

The journey of non-*Mahar* Ambedkarites in their participation in Ambedkar Jayanti celebrations is no less of an adventure. The journey was not easy; they faced many hurdles and challenges. One of the incidents, Dhimant Rashtrapal, narrated his experience of Ambedkar Jayanti and animosity among castes when he celebrated Ambedkar Jayanti in his village. When Dhimant took the initiative to celebrate Ambedkar Jayanti in the village for the first time, people from the *Mahar* community converted to Buddhism opposed it. They had a claim over Ambedkar and asked him not to celebrate Ambedkar Jayanti. But he was firm on his decision to celebrate it. It created tension between the two communities in the village.

On another occasion, Dhimant organized Ambedkar Jayanti and invited Adv. Eknath Awad as a chief guest for the Ambedkar Jayanti program. Awad was a prominent leader from the

Marathwada region who had even represented India and raised human rights issues at United Nations Organization. But *Mahars* of the village did not participate in the gathering called for the celebration of Ambedkar Jayanti. This rivalry between the two castes was one of the critical reasons why *Matangs* stayed away from the conversion process. Incidents like this show the hatred and rivalry between two significant castes in the Dalit community.

On the other hand, much before the incident happened at Dhimant's village in Ambejogai Taluka, in the case of Shriranga Thorat, who hails from Kaij Taluka after his first year at Milind college, was motivated to do something to bring people out of their houses and participate in the anti-caste movement. He and his friends decided to celebrate Ambedkar Jayanti in his village. It was one of the critical events in the life of people from Mang Vadagaon village because the village's *Matang* community never celebrated Ambedkar Jayanti. It was never an easy task. Shriranga, when he returned to his village during summer vacation with his community friends, started planning for the celebration. Right from the planning, people were advising him not to involve in this. Despite the opposition from the people from the Mang Vadagaon village, he was determined to celebrate Ambedkar Jayanti in the village.³¹⁸

It was when Shriranga Thorat realized people could establish community bonds based on the idols they follow. When he proposed the concept of celebrating Ambedkar Jayanti, it was his community stood against this and asked him why do you want to celebrate the *Mahar* leader. The community was interested in the celebration of their local deity and not in Ambedkar Jayanti. They also prevented their kids from taking part in organizing Jayanti. Shriranga Thorat's parents were also against the idea of the celebration of Ambedkar Jayanti in the village as their community

³¹⁸ Interview with Shriranga Thorat on 8th May 2018.

members refrained from taking part in it. To threaten him, his parents told Shriranga Thorat that they would break Ambedkar's photo if he brought one home. He used to counter by telling them they might get arrested for doing that, as Ambedkar had made such a law.³¹⁹

Contrary to the experience of Shriranga Thorat with his community, Buddhist villagers from neighboring villages supported him in celebrating the Ambedkar Jayanti in his village. Shriranga Thorat named Bhaskar Gaikwad and Bhagavan Gaikwad from neighboring Kalamb village belonging to the Buddhist community converted from *Mahar* caste who came forward to guide Shriranga Thorat in organizing the first-ever Ambedkar Jayanti of Mang Vadagaon village. The help, however, never came without warning him of the consequences he might face for the celebration of Ambedkar Jayanti in his village. The Sarpanch- an elected village panchayat head who was *Maratha* by caste and Police Patil- a village-level police overseer who was *Mali* by caste from Mang Vadagaon village, also agreed to help them in organizing Ambedkar Jayanti in the village. Once the celebration began, some of their community members also started coming out to participate. Shriranga Thorat said, “one must stand firm on the decision till the end; people support the right cause. Things change, and so do the traditions.”³²⁰

Shriranga Thorat, with the help of others, changed the tradition and set the new discourse. Ambedkar Jayanti now was not the monopoly of *Mahars* converted to Buddhism. Now it was celebrated in the colonies of non-*Mahar* castes. The Buddhist from the neighboring village, the *Maratha* village Sarpanch- a dominant caste in Maharashtra, and a *Mali* Police Patil who comes under the OBC category, such diverse people from not his caste came forward and helped him in this process. Everyone had their reasons to support and help. Not all of them connected with the

³¹⁹ Interview with Shriranga Thorat on 8th May 2018.

³²⁰ Interview with Shriranga Thorat on 8th May 2018.

cause in the same manner. Buddhist community from a neighboring village took it as their moral responsibility to support him. In contrast, Sarpanch and Police Patil came forward as someone associated with the law and administration, as it concerned with the Constitution maker Dr. Ambedkar.

The community had both kinds of experiences, narrow-minded thinking, and others with a broad approach. Such experiences could have a different interpretation. Previously, this attitude of *Matangs* was thought to be a product of their docile caste character (Waghmore, 2013), but how do we explain Buddhists asserting their "*Mahars*" superiority in such circumstances? It also exposes the orthodoxy among marginalized communities. The process of change on an individual level and system change is unique in any movement which aims for social change. Suppose we change the individuals and not the oppressive social order; in that case, the person who lives according to the new values becomes lonely, excluded, and suffocated in society following the old values. At the same time, if there is no change in the individual and just changing the oppressive social order and the social system, then the modified system is in danger of being undone by the unchanged person as the individual is the means to implement the changed value.³²¹

Ambedkarite communities now use these public platforms to develop leaders from marginalized cultures to speak and express their ideas and thoughts. The politicization of local communities through Ambedkar Jayanti and Buddha Jayanti has created autonomous leadership and influenced village polity. Many of the activists from non-*Mahar* communities working with Eknath Awad went on lead Jayanti festivals in the villages. Several villages saw joint Jayanti festivals organized by local communities of different castes. They began to challenge injustice

³²¹ Ramagorakh, Dhammasangini. (2011: 125). Unpublished PhD thesis in Marathi titled '*Maharashtratil boudh striyanchya moukhik etihache strivadi akalan*', submitted to Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune.

mated out with marginalized communities in the villages. Activists and leaders started to visit remote villages for the Ambedkar Jayanti programs. It created a positive atmosphere among communities as they could generate external support to guide them through difficult times. Therefore, we can see celebrations of Ambedkar Jayanti and Buddha Jayanti by oppressed identities from a socio-religion and political perspective.

Similarly, tribals and DNT communities were never part of such celebrations. However, now they also celebrate Ambedkar Jayanti and Buddha Jayanti uniquely. The spread of education and, along with it, Phule Ambedkarite's thoughts and values have a more significant impact on the younger generation of the tribal community. It has resulted in their assertion of selfhood through active participation in organizing Ambedkar Jayanti and Buddha Jayanti in tribal localities (Pada). The tribal community now believes that Ambedkarite ideology and principles are fundamental to mark their presence and existence in an oppressive society. Ambedkar Jayanti and Buddha Jayanti are the platforms for being utilized by the community to show respect to these great personalities. It is also a platform for acknowledging and honoring community elders for their resilience and struggle. Community asks their elders to preside and conduct the proceedings of celebrations.

It is a rare event in the marginalized community's life as they rarely get such opportunities to come onto the stage and lead the programs. Only upper-caste and dominant families can lead and preside over the festivals and public programs in the village structure. There is a distinction between the political mobilization of marginalized communities under the direction of leaders from upper castes, the political action of members of socially backward communities for their own political gain, and the use of Ambedkarite ideology as a vehicle for political mobilization. Community mobilization via the Ambedkarite movement converts political solidarity into a caste-

free, non-hierarchical, and equal society, distinct from upper-caste leadership organizing marginalized populations for political ends.

Beginning of Shift: normalization of anti-caste ideology and its assertion

Buddhism, as an anti-caste ideology at the theoretical level, promises human dignity and a sense of respect in the public domain of social order and will be examined as a form of protest against oppressive and unjust social domination legitimized by Hinduism. Buddhism, a religion with teachings that have universal appeal, has now, in a true sense, become a social movement, a political ideology, a religion of the oppressed, and a collective religious identity of marginalized sections of society. The Ambedkarite social campaign aimed at social change through Buddhism is not only about system change but also individual transformation. As mentioned earlier, the purpose of Dhamma is to reorganize the world, that is, to establish a system that enables the individual to change the oppressive society around them.

However, as mentioned earlier, there was always a feeling of hostility between the different castes, but with constant efforts from activists and community leaders, things have changed for the better. Activist missionaries are working on the ground to spread awareness. It took time, but people are changing. Ambedkarite discourse is shaping their thoughts. People from different castes, for instance, the *Mahars*, *Matang*, *Charmakars*, *Tribes*, and *OBC* communities from villages, have started celebrating Ambedkar Jayanti together. The tension between these castes is reducing. People have started accepting each other. Newly converted Buddhists from non-*Mahar* communities get much respect among Buddhists. They do not see the caste of origin but the current status as Buddhist.

In the past, when Ambedkarites used to assert their identity and ideology as Buddhist and anti-caste, they faced backlash from the dominant caste. Most of the Buddhists at that time were from the *Mahar* caste. There was no public acceptance of their assertion. But they stood their ground and allowed Ambedkarite ideology and Buddhist identity to remain at the center of discussion. But today, they get support from across the castes. People are organizing in large numbers to support victims of caste violence and even come out to support activists working for the cause irrespective of the caste of their origin. Dr. Hamraj Uike says,

“I remember organizing talks and speeches of anti-caste scholars and activists was not a popular event across Maharashtra. But in the recent past, people are inviting scholars and activists from non-Mahar castes to speak at public events in the remotest villages of Maharashtra. I have personally gone to many villages and even tribal padas (remote localities of indigenous people) to deliver speeches. People from nearby villages come to attend the talks and invite me to their village for the next event.”³²²

It shows that anti-caste ideology and its assertion, even in the remote corner of the country and the state, goes beyond caste identities. All credit goes to the anti-caste activists and people for their courage and persistence. All sections of society accept these things because they talk about the forms of social exploitation of marginalized people. People can directly relate to this and feel the necessity to support these activities. Reality is the biggest challenge for the so-called upper caste. They cannot deny or reject the oppressive and exploitative nature of caste.

³²² Interview with Dr. Hamraj Uike on 11th April 2018.

Shifting Strategies: Example of Belura village

The progressive anti-caste Dalit movement in Beed district has deep roots in Ambedkarite ideology. Ambedkar Jayanti is a platform for activists and leaders from the community to spread Ambedkarite values and ideas among the masses. However, going to different villages, attending Ambedkar Jayanti, and spreading awareness about Ambedkarite thoughts and ideas was challenging as it involved critically engaging with caste, which often did not go down well with upper castes in the villages.

In the beginning, people belonging *Matang* community were not part of Ambedkar Jayanti celebrations. Bringing that change to make the non-*Mahar* community participate in the Ambedkar Jayanti celebration became possible because of people like Aatmaram Chandane, Eknath Awad, Hanumant Upare, and G S Dada Kamble non-*Mahar* Ambedkarite leaders. They used to give speeches and attack the caste hierarchy. They used to attack Hindu Gods and Goddesses. For this, people from their community used to criticize them. Community people used to abuse them for their speeches against Hindu Gods. But those leaders never took a step back.

Sometimes people from the upper caste *Maratha* community used to ask not to bring these speakers into the village for the Ambedkar Jayanti program and accuse them of giving *spotak*-aggressive speeches and creating tension among otherwise ‘peaceful’ villagers by hurting Hindu sentiments by abusing God. Organizers of Ambedkar Jayanti used to defend them, saying the speakers are not harming you or your religion; they are questioning us, the marginalized communities, for following abusive religion. If Dalits or other backward castes are considered part of Hindus, then abusing them and their faith should not be a problem for the *Maratha* community.

The speeches are given not to hurt the *Maratha* community but to enlighten the marginalized community.

However, enlightening them about their low status in the caste hierarchy and exploitations goes against the interest of privileged upper castes. Therefore, they had no reason to allow that to happen peacefully. Ajinkya Chandane narrated the experience of the social boycott on the *Mahar* caste after the Ambedkar Jayanti celebration at Belura village in Beed district. *Maratha* caste is a majority in that village. People from the *Mahar* community invited Atmaram Chandane as a guest speaker for that program. He spoke about the falsehood of Hindu Gods. It inflated the situation in the village. Since he accused the gods of the deteriorating condition of Dalits, the *Marathas* of the village got angry and boycotted the *Mahars* and *Matangs* of the village.

Aatmaram Chandane called up for administrative support from District Police and asked them to give protection to the *Mahar* and *Matang* castes of the village. They brought the situation in the village under control with the intervention of the police. Since then, *Mahar* and *Matang* did not celebrate Ambedkar Jayanti in the village. A couple of years back, they restarted celebrating Ambedkar Jayanti and invited Ajinkya Chandane as a guest speaker for the event. Ajinkya Chandane says,

“The speech my father gave was called ‘anti-Hindu’ and escalated community tension. I had those experiences of my father in my mind. Therefore, it was a bigger challenge for me to give a speech that should be provocative for people to think about their current situation and, at the same time, should not escalate tension among communities. We should not be submissive. We should have the courage to speak out about what is wrong, but at the same time, our speeches

*should not create trouble for those who live there in the village. Therefore, in my speech, I focused on bridging that gap between Maratha and other marginalized castes in general and Mahar and Matang castes in specific. I talked about the history where Mahar and Matang caste people helped Shivaji, a Maratha king, in fighting against the enemy. I also talked about how Sambhaji, Shivaji's son, was tortured and killed by enemies and how the Mahar people came in help when others failed to organize his funeral, going against the dictates of the opponent king, asking not to do the same. It had a positive impact on both communities. We must change our strategies to address the situation according to time and context."*³²³

In this case, activist missionaries use historical facts to provoke people to think about their location in the caste hierarchy. For example, during Chhatrapati Shivaji's time, there was harmony among different castes, but after the demise of his son Chhatrapati Sambhaji and the control of the *Maratha* kingdom went into the hands of Brahmin Peshwas, the relationship between the castes started deteriorating.

Anti-caste movement in Maharashtra has provoked the non-Brahmin dominant castes through its literature and constant engagement with social issues of various castes. It has an impact on progressive people belonging to these communities. As a result, activists of *Maratha Seva Sangha* and *Sambhaji Brigade*, both organizations that work among the dominant *Maratha* caste, started to speak about the social location of the *Maratha* community by invoking the incident of the *Rajyabhishek*- The coronation ceremony of Shivaji. Brahmin priests denied Chhatrapati Shivaji

³²³ Interview with Ajinkya Chandane on 7th May 2018.

the coronation as King for his shudra status. According to the *chaturvarna* system, only Kshatriya, not shudra, can be coronated as King. The activist of *Maratha Seva Sangha* and *Sambhaji Brigade* suggested that rather than organizing the *parayan*³²⁴ of Mahabharat, and Ramayana, Indian myths, and epics, they should organize Shivaji Jayanti and celebrate it for seven days. Now *Marathas* of the village schedule seven days of *parayan* of Chhatrapati Shivaji. It is the change activists missionary desired to see in society.

Activists like Sangameshwar Andhalkar, who hails from the *Lingayat*, an OBC caste, he was impressed by the activism of the *Maratha Seva Sangha* and *Sambhaji Brigade*. He joined *Sambhaji Brigade* during college and started participating in cadre camps organized in the Beed district. Cadre camps exposed him to the anti-caste stand of Lingayat spiritual leader Basaweshwar, which also connects with Buddhism. Sangameshwar is a staunch believer in anti-caste ideology. He is associated with *Satyashodhak OBC Parishad* and attended Buddhist conversion along with Sandeep Upare at Deeksha Bhumi, Nagpur.

The long-term vision of activist missionaries is to reduce the tension between the different caste groups by continuing to educate ignorant caste society. Ashok Tangade believes that a violent caste society is also a victim of Brahminism. Therefore, he says,

*“It is our responsibility to explain all that happens because of Brahmanism and its wrong customs and religious ideas. Even if we do not succeed in eradicating caste, Buddhist ideology can at least remove the rigid walls of segregation and hatred between the communities.”*³²⁵

³²⁴ *Parayan* is a seven-day religious festival in which devotees of the Hindu religion read the sacred texts from beginning to end, splitting them into different sessions.

³²⁵ Interview with Ashok Tangade on 12th April 2019.

Inclusive Iconography: Non-*Mahar* Buddhist Convert and symbolic assertion

Buddhist discourse today in Maharashtra is an effort towards harmonizing different communities into one community under the fold of Buddhism. The standardization of rituals and symbols may lead to rigidity in practicing religion daily, but the Buddhist community in Maharashtra has the freedom to carry out their practices and symbols. Images of Ambedkar and Buddha were never part of the non-*Mahar* lifeworld. As discussed earlier, along with Ambedkar's *Mahar* identity, his conversion to Buddhism also reduced Buddha to that *Mahar* dominance. The situation is changing, and beyond non-*Mahar*, castes are showing shifts and including different anti-caste icons in their lifeworld. They are also mixing the various traditions into the contemporary revival of Buddhism in Maharashtra.

The strong language of inclusive community has also got translated into actions. The community's living rooms are adorned with images of Shivaji Maharaj, Mahatma Phule, Shahu Maharaj, Ambedkar, Buddha, and Anna Bhau on their walls. It shows how communities are keeping their differences aside and putting efforts into allying with the anti-caste movement. Mr. Ram (Name changed) once talked about his experience of how he had to confront his friends, community, and relatives, including his wife, on the issue of whose images should be in the house. He is from the Charmakar community. In his community, revered Sant Ravidas and his pictures are displayed as an expression of pride and their Charmakar identity. However, he also believed that, along with Sant Ravidas, he should keep images of other revolutionaries.



Figure 5.4: Photos of Revolutionary Leaders presented on the wall of Mr. Chandravadan Jadhav in his living room in Beed: (Left to Right)- Buddha, Samrat Ashoka, Dr. Ambedkar, Mahatma Phule, Savitrimai Phule, Shahu Maharaj, Ahilyadevi Holkar, and Anna Bhau Sathe. (Photo by Author)

During the housewarming ceremony of Ram's new house, they conducted Buddhist rituals. He kept Buddha and Ambedkar's photos in the place. His relatives insisted on keeping Sant Ravidas's picture alone. They also cautioned him that if he does not adhere to community practices, he will find it challenging to get his kids married. However, he was sure he wanted to keep Buddha and Ambedkar, along with Sant Ravidas, in his living room. For him, the ideas of Ravidas are the same as that of Buddha and Ambedkar. He reminds people that Ambedkar had dedicated one of his books to Ravidas. Ravidas's teachings are an offshoot of Buddha's message for humanity; therefore, Buddhism is their goal.

There is a shift in how the community uses wedding invitation cards to assert their ideological affiliations. Shivaji Maharaj, Mahatma Phule, Shahu Maharaj, Ambedkar, Buddha, and Anna Bhau are finding their places on the invitation cards of non-*Mahar* Buddhist converts (See figure 5.5). These iconic leaders and reformers aimed at a caste-free and equal society. In the first

such attempt, Buddhists converted from Mahar origin first replaced images of Gods from their invitation cards with Ambedkar and Buddha. Mixing historically iconic leaders and social revolutionaries is an innovation from non-*Mahar* Buddhist converts into the Buddhist symbolic assertion.

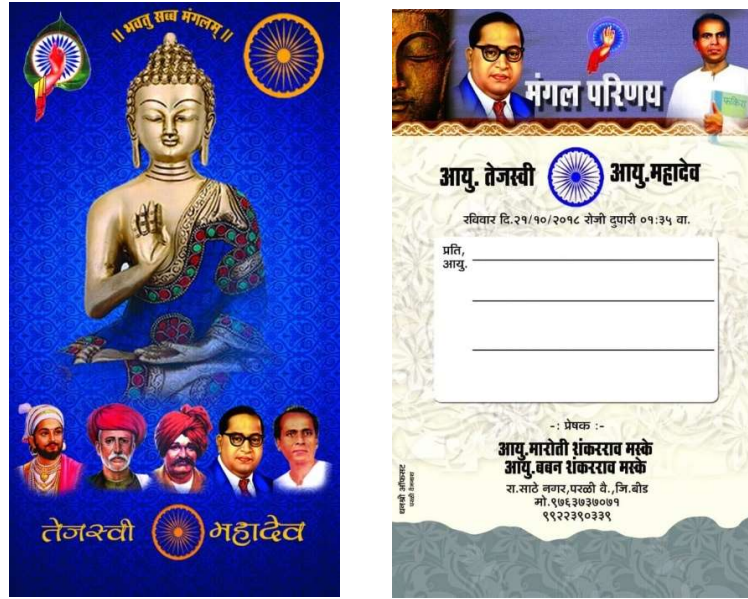


Figure 5.5: Invitation Card of Buddhist Wedding of the couple belonging to the non-*Mahar* community.

As the families have also got courage and inspiration from the life struggles of charismatic leaders from the contemporary Buddhist movement in Maharashtra, their images have also given space on the dais. The daises of wedding ceremonies are adorned with photos of leaders such as Hanumant Upare, Eknath Awad, and GS Dada Kamble, along with pictures of social revolutionaries. These iconic leaders and social revolutionaries replace Brahmanical symbols and images (See figure 5.6).

However, mixing traditions does not mean they are deviating from the Buddhist discourse or it is degenerating Buddhist tradition. They sometimes face critical questions, such as why they need other photos on the dais when Buddha and Ambedkar are already there. Question of not

having standard practices might lead to a sectarian notion in Buddhism, also raised against such diversification of symbols and images. Sometimes it is blamed on the lack of guidance and qualified teachers in Buddhist discourse.



Figure 5.6: Wedding dais of the Buddhist wedding of the couple belonging to a non-Mahar community inspire by Hanumant Upare's movement for Buddhist conversion.³²⁶

However, activists insist on having different photos on the dais as a sign of diversity in the movement. The Buddhist discourse should prioritize the inclusivity of those considered 'others.' It is also an effort toward decentralizing Buddhist discourse and bringing different narratives to the anti-caste movement through Buddhism. Ram says that symbolic assertion and continuous engagement with anti-caste ideas can bring down the opposition. Ram's wife given-up Hindu deities, and she now follows Buddhism. She has melted metal idols of Gods and made Buddha's statue out of it. It is the change activist missionaries aim for through symbolic assertion in daily practices.

³²⁶ Picture reproduced with permission from Sandeep Upare.

The Monthly Gathering on Full-Moon Day: An alternative space for the Buddhist community

Full moon days have a special reverence in Buddhism. It is considered one of the special occasions in Buddhist culture. Considering the importance of the full-moon day in Buddhism, community gatherings are the regular activity Buddhists in Beed town practice every full moon day. Two such meetings were held at Dharmaraj Majamule's residence and Sandeep and Santosh Upare's residence at Beed. The place for such a meeting is pre-decided while concluding the previous session.

One family usually volunteers to host the program, and others accept their invitations. All the participants gather at the decided venue in the evening. Evenings are preferred for the gathering to make it convenient for all, including those with jobs. One of the persons from members present serves as the presiding president for that gathering and anchors the entire program (See figure 5.7). The program begins with a brief introduction round in which members introduce themselves to everyone. One of the participants has already been responsible for preparing a sermon about a particular topic, and they present it during the gathering.

These meetings serve as a space to gather to learn from each other about Buddha and his teachings. The members also use this space to socialize and bridge the gap between fellow members going beyond the previous caste identities before their conversion. Gatherings are not exclusively for Buddhist converts; some new members interested in learning about Buddhism come for such meetings, as those who have yet to get converted wish to know more about Buddha and his teaching. It serves as the platform for the families to meet each other and share their space and feelings. This community space created by Buddhists for themselves also aims to reach out to fellow community members for help or assistance.



Figure 5.7: Community Gathering on Full Moon Day at Hanumant Upare's residence in Beed. (Photo by Author)

In one of the gatherings, Mr. Bhosale, who runs a residential school for the DNT- Paradhi community, needed financial support. He brought up this topic for discussion after the Buddhist Prayers got over. Some members contributed financially on the spot; some assured him of their contribution later as they were not carrying sufficient funds. People donate valuable things to the temples. It mostly comes from offerings made with expectations of getting something for self as blessings from divine power. In Buddhism, people donate without any expectations to be fulfilled by religious authority or God, as there is no God. Donations among Buddhists are offerings people give away out of social responsibility towards fellow community members who require support and help. There are no expectations from any supernatural power to do some favor in return, as most of the devotees seek from their respective Gods.

It was also a space where political mobilization happened in favor of marginalized voices in the political field. During the 2019 general elections, Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi contested the election for the first time. They challenged the dominant political discourse and set the tone for an autonomous political alternative for marginalized communities. From Beed Lok Sabha

Constituency, Prof Vishnu Jadhav was contesting. Prof Jadhav belonged to the DNT community before his conversion to Buddhism. He converted to Buddhism along with Laxman Mane in 2006. Prof Jadhav was present for one of such gatherings in which he put forward his candidature for support from the community and appealed to the members for a financial contribution to the campaign.

Thus, the community creates such spaces to create a sense of group identity through congruence. So far, communities have come together as caste groups for political purposes. But now Buddhism serves as a more significant umbrella identity for individuals from different castes as a larger community. Such community gatherings also provide political space for groups' internal political autonomy in the larger society.

Women in Buddhist Conversion Movement: Confronting Caste to Reconstruct Society

In a caste system, women are exploited, degraded, and treated inhumanely. The caste system, which also serves as the basis for women's oppression, is a product of the Brahmanical patriarchy. In the name of rituals, customs, traditions, etc., they are subject to discrimination. In patriarchy, women are troubled at various levels. Even in routine actions, they are subject to numerous boundaries and controls. It forces women to be excluded from various domains of daily life. Due to their status as women in a society where men predominate, as well as the fact that they belong to one of the downtrodden castes, Dalit women experience double oppression (Paik, 2014).³²⁷ The caste system is the basis of Brahmanical patriarchy, hence the root of women's oppression

³²⁷ Paik, Shailaja. (2014). *Dalit women's Education in Modern India: Double Discrimination*. New York: Routledge.

(Chakravarti, 2004:192).³²⁸ The Brahmanical religion uses women to control the boundaries of castes; breaking those boundaries constitutes a significant part of the anti-caste ideology.

Therefore, the main goal of the anti-caste movement led by Mahatma and Savitribai Phule was the liberation of women from oppression. They held that establishing a gender-equal society and freeing women from the stifling caste patriarchy represented the first steps toward eradicating the caste system. Women from converted households found themselves caught between two opposing philosophies with the resurgence of Buddhism in Maharashtra. On the one hand, the Buddhist tradition guarantees freedom from all forms of oppression and inequality to all its followers; on the other, it is the tradition of patriarchal traditions of caste society. The most straightforward approach to determine whether Buddhism is aiding communities in overcoming caste is to pay attention to how recently converted communities handle gender-related discrimination. Therefore, it is crucial to see how Buddhist women oppose gender inequality and transcend caste boundaries.

Women's assertion of equal status in Buddhism and its actual implementation poses a significant threat to caste society and constitute a significant component of Buddhist anti-caste doctrine. It has been highlighted how some women overcame caste patriarchy, embraced Buddhism, and served as role models for other women. Their tenacious struggle demonstrated that Buddhism grants everyone freedom and liberation. The change in the culture from oppressive patriarchal caste order to egalitarian Buddhism gave them a new ideology that treated them with dignity.

³²⁸ Chakravarti, Uma. (2004:192). Is Buddhism the Answer to Brahmanical Patriarchy? In Jondhale, Surendra and Beltz, Johannes (eds), *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. Pp. 186-202.

Ms. Madhu (name has changed) hails from the *Matang* caste. She had to rebel against her parents, who tried to force her into early marriage and eventually denied her education. Madhu called off her wedding against her parent's wishes, completed her education, and qualified to secure a government job in one of the Government Medical Colleges in Maharashtra. Later, when she decided to get married after securing a job, she expressed disappointment with how society defines beauty. She says she was not beautiful to society. A man with a government job is considered prosperous. Men not being attractive cannot hinder getting acceptance from the community for marriage proposals. Such privilege is not available for not-so-pretty women.

Her life after marriage was the same as it had been while living with her parents. Her in-laws were upset with her since she did not have kids. Because she has a government position and a steady income to support an unemployed husband, her in-laws, parents, and jobless husband pressured her to let her husband get married a second time without divorcing her. She suggested that the baby be adopted as a solution. Neither the divorce nor the adoption received their consent. They chose her because they were more concerned with her income than with who she was as a person. She eventually used legal means to divorce her husband, and after, she adopted a daughter and became a single mother.

Whatever Ms. Madhu has accomplished in her life, she attributes to Dr. Ambedkar. She did not accept the suffering she had endured as her "destiny," as is expected from women, but instead, she held caste patriarchy responsible for the oppression of women. She feels that Dr. Ambedkar's constitution and his commitment to human dignity have granted her the right to live with dignity. However, caste patriarchy continues to dominate people's cognitive processes and legitimizes such discriminating behavior. The caste patriarchy system forced her parents to treat their offspring of different genders unequally. She decided to become a Buddhist because she was

confident that the principles of Buddha's Dhamma contained all the teachings she needed to live a respectable life.

Ms. Madhu's life after conversion does not appear to be simple. Her choice to file for divorce from her spouse had already angered her parents. Madhu has also converted, adopted a daughter, and her parents have cut her off from their family, making the situation much worse. The struggle Ms. Madhu endured at the hands of her family and her decision to become a Buddhist must be understood in the historical context of the ex-untouchable castes' internalization and acceptance of their ritualistic status as outcasts in the caste system (Fitzgerald, 1997:226).³²⁹ All of these oppressive mechanisms were defied by Ms. Madhu. She separated from her husband, adopted a female kid after her divorce, converted to Buddhism, and lived independently of repressive caste and patriarchal norms.

Madhu's transformation from a persecuted Hindu woman to an independent Buddhist activist has been significantly influenced by the *Satyashodhak Samaj Mahasangh* (SSM), the socio-religious movement founded by G S Dada Kamble. As a missionary group, SSM works with the underprivileged groups in these areas, awakening them to the history of their Buddhist past and its philosophy and ultimately inspiring them to become Buddhists. Ms. Madhu is volunteering for the SSM as the Women's Wing District Coordinator for one of the districts.

In response to concerns about the potential isolation of untouchable castes after conversion, Dr. Ambedkar stated that the only way to eliminate social isolation is to form ties with and become a member of another group devoid of the spirit of caste (Ambedkar, 2014:413).³³⁰ As she continued

³²⁹ Fitzgerald, Timothy. (1997). Ambedkar Buddhism in Maharashtra. *Contribution to Indian Sociology*, 31, (2). 1997. Pp. 225-251.

³³⁰ Ambedkar, B.R. (2014:413). *Away from Hindus*, In Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 5.

to spend time with SSM and strive to disseminate Buddhism among disadvantaged groups, Ms. Madhu discovered new friends and family there. She narrated one of the incidents from her life when she had to undergo critical surgery, and there was hardly anyone from her family to support her during that time. Doctors had advised her to go on complete bed rest. She found her new family in SSM and fellow community members who supported her and cared for her in hard times. Again, she invoked the *karuna-bhav*,³³¹ which Buddhism taught came to her help. Having sympathy for each other and helping everyone go beyond caste and creed boundaries is the *karuna-bhav* of Buddhism. Childless women, widows, and divorcees face humiliation, no place in ceremonial life, and rejection, irrespective of their caste affiliations. Ms. Madhu challenged all the ideal expectations from women and set an example. With her affirmation of human dignity through religious conversion, she rejected not only gender restrictions but also caste boundaries.

The sacred nature of religious acts and ideas, which get their significance from the forbidden, is emphasized in Durkheim's (1995)³³² definition of religion. Similarly, Hindu ritualistic life uses the female body to uphold its holiness by placing numerous constraints on it. They uphold sanctity by guarding against and outlawing non-sacred objects. Menstrual women are kept away from daily life and seen as untouchable by their family members because they view menstruating women's natural abilities as impure and are forbidden from participating in joyous religious rites. Despite the constitution governing every person in independent India, women are still oppressed under the pretext of religious customs and culture.

In other words, religious traditions and culture are sustained on the exclusion and exploitation of women in the religion. On the other hand, in a hierarchical caste structure, the castes

³³¹ Feeling of compassion for all.

³³² Durkheim, Emile. (1995:38). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: The Free Press.

and individuals engaged in ritualistic activities, and the priesthood are always viewed as one of the highest and purest. Men always dominate the ritualistic status, whereas women have never been allowed to preside over or perform any rituals in Hinduism. Even their entry into the temples is prohibited because of their menstruating capacities. Therefore, dissociating oneself from the mandated gender roles for women is the first step towards freedom from a caste-patriarchal society since their bodies are employed to uphold religious holiness.

At one point in the early stage of the Buddhist revival in Maharashtra, men dominated all Buddhist rituals as *Bhante/ Baudh Bhikku/ Baudhacharya* were men. However, during fieldwork in the Beed district, it has been observed in Buddhist weddings that female *Baudhacharya* performed the ceremonial part. Mrs. Manisha Tokle, a social activist from Beed, has performed many Buddhists and *Satyashodhak* weddings. Mrs. Manisha, fondly called Tai hails from an OBC community. She married a Buddhist man and converted to Buddhism in a mass conversion event organized by *Manvi Hakka Abhiyan* (campaign for human rights), led by the late Adv. Eknath Awad at Deeksha bhumi, Nagpur, in the year 2006.

Manisha Tai, a full-time social activist who has dedicated her life to the cause of women's emancipation, exemplifies the type of activist missionary Dr. Ambedkar had in mind. Manisha Tai confronts gender roles in the spiritual world by engaging in such religious rites. She plays a crucial role in promoting, orchestrating, and carrying out numerous inter-caste/religious marriages, along with her spouse Mr. Ashok, a Buddhist and full-time social activist. Families often oppose inter-caste marriages, especially when one partner belongs to a lower caste and the other is from an upper caste. Therefore, they encourage and help couples perform inter-caste marriages and work to ensure the safety of newly married couples after marriages.

Manisha Tai's self-reading about Buddha's teaching and her experience of working as a social activist at the grassroots level made her an authority on the anti-caste movement. She believes that men and women are equal and are equally capable of changing their life world, and gave her the strength to stand for what is right. Manisha Tai says,

*"Conversion to Buddhism means you consider everyone equal. But it is not true for everyone. Even Ambedkarite Buddhists do not treat their women equally. Even after conversion, many men were unaware of the subtle patriarchy in their day-to-day lives. We must make them aware of it."*³³³

Manisha Tai emphasizes the self-reflexive nature of the anti-caste ideology of Buddhism. Questioning everything is part of Buddhist practice; therefore, one must reflect on how followers of Buddhism implement this principle in their daily life.

Manisha Tai did not stop at highlighting important Buddhist philosophical lessons; she also put those lessons into practice through her anti-caste agitation and involvement in social movements. She served as Savitribai Phule Mahila Mandal's (SPMM) president- one of the programs launched by Manavi Hakka Abhiyan under Eknath Awad's direction. One of the crucial tasks performed by SPMM was raising awareness of gender equality among men and women. They have held numerous workshops on enhancing women's leadership skills and gender equality for both men and women (See Figure 5.8). Manisha Tai ensures she enlightens the men whenever she can address them in public rallies. Talking about it publically, she says, "Unless we achieve

³³³ Interview with Manisha Tokle on 10th April 2018.

gender equality in all spheres of life, we cannot say that we have become Buddhists in a true sense.”³³⁴



Figure 5.8: Manisha Tai Addressing Public gathering on Ambedkar Jayanti at Pali Village in Beed District. (Photo by Author)

As Dr. Ambedkar (2014) believed that “The ideal religion transforms society into a moral, ideal, and democratic order, such as Buddhism.”³³⁵ Ambedkar also said in the context of the role of women in the movement for social change that “Men and women together resolve the problems of everyday life. So must the problems of society be solved by men and women working together. If the men take up this work on their own, there is no doubt that they will take a long time to complete it. But if women take this work on themselves, I am sure they will soon succeed.”³³⁶ The work that women social activists are currently doing reflects Dr. Ambedkar's philosophy of blending Buddhist principles with political activism to bring about social transformation. By rejecting gender roles and adopting a compassionate attitude when addressing women's difficulties, they challenge the Brahmanical patriarchal framework in their daily actions as social

³³⁴ Interview with Manisha Tokle on 10th April 2018.

³³⁵ See Ambedkar, B.R. (2014). *Buddha and his Dhamma*, In Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 11.

³³⁶ Quoted in Pawar, Urmila, and Moon, Meenakshi. (2008:121). *We also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*. (Translation by Sonalkar, Wandana). New Delhi: Zubaan.

activists, regardless of caste or class. To organize women to act against caste and educate other women about anti-caste concepts and Buddhist ideals, Ambedkarite women launched campaigns like Maitri Manch.

On festivals such as Sankranti, married women follow certain rituals for their husbands. Buddhist women, too, to some extent, follow similar traditions. The slight change they made is that rather than going to Hindu temples to perform Puja and rituals, they started to visit the Ambedkar statue in Beed town. Manisha Tai and her fellow activist women of Maitri Manch decided to counsel whoever came to perform the rituals.



Figure 5.9: Manisha Tai counseling women devotees who came to perform rituals on Sankranti at Ambedkar Smarak in Beed.³³⁷

Therefore, every year on Sankranti, which falls on January 14th, women volunteers of *Maitri Manch* gather at the Ambedkar statue and counsel the women who come there to perform rituals

³³⁷ Picture reproduced with the permission of Manish Tai.

(See Figure 5.9). Mostly women converted to Buddhism come to the Ambedkar statue to perform rituals. Though they rejected the Hindu religion, they continued to practice some of its traditions.

Joel Robbins (2017:29-52),³³⁸ while addressing the possibility of conversion without a cultural change, argued that it is impossible and said conversion requires some cultural change. He used Dumont's approach to understand the relationship between culture and values further. Dumont believes that value can be seen as a component of a culture that shapes how other factors relate to one another. Therefore, it should only be assumed that a significant cultural change occurs when new values have been added or when the relationship between old values has changed. In this context, what women activists are doing is they are putting continuous efforts to educate their fellow women on issues related to continuity in following the oppressive traditions without breaking the value attached to it as something superstitious, irrational, and contrary to Buddhist values.

To counter the cultural dominance of Hindu rituals such as Sankranti, the activists invoke the importance of January month in the Ambedkarite anti-caste movement. January marks the birth anniversaries of two significant anti-caste icons, Jeeja Mata (Mother of King Shivaji) and Savitri Bai Phule. Savitribai Phule was born on January 3rd, and Jeeja Mata was born on January 12th. *Maitri Manch* organizes activities for ten days between January 3rd to January 12th every year. The ten days program is named *Stree Sanman Parva*- Celebration of Women's Dignity and contains talks on multiple issues related to women. They organize discussions on various topics, such as the contribution of Buddha, Savitribai, Jeeja Mata, Shahu Maharaj, Ambedkar, and Phule to women's upliftment and welfare (See Figure 5.10). Through this, women are educated about the

³³⁸ Robbins, Joel. (2017). Can there be Conversion without Cultural Change? *Mission Studies*, 34 (2017), pp 29-52.

irrational myths and embedded discriminatory nature of rituals, further linking it to their social exploitation.



Figure 5.10: Advertisement Banner of *Stree Sanman Parv* organized by *Maitri Manch*, Beed.³³⁹

The women's wing of DPI has started another such initiative called *Mahila Sanman Parishad*. They organize it every year on the birth anniversary of Mukta Salve, which falls on September 5th. They chose Mukta Salve's birth anniversary for the program because they are reviving the history of anti-caste icons, confronting Hindutva propaganda, reclaiming them, challenging patriarchal notions, and bringing women into the anti-caste movement. DPI is celebrating the legacy of friendship and linkages between social revolutionaries from different social backgrounds. Organizing such events motivate people from marginalized communities. It is a deliberate attempt to bring widows onto center stage in the *Mahila Sanman Parishad*. The patriarchal society rejects widows and excludes them from public life and community celebrations. It is also common in marginalized communities to follow such practices. Despite this

³³⁹ Picture reproduced with permission from Ashok Tangade.

notion, DPI celebrates every woman's dignity, regardless of her marital status. Therefore, the women's movement in Beed attempts to connect the feminist approach with the anti-caste struggle by reclaiming Ambedkar's intervention in understanding Brahmanical patriarchy (Rege, 2013, p. 20).³⁴⁰

Reclamation and Innovations of traditions: non-*Mahar* Buddhist counter culture

Confronting caste is the biggest challenge. Activist missionaries are making people aware of their problems, issues, and their root cause. Some critical issues people face are a lack of education, awareness about their rights, and fear of superstitions. It together results in their exclusion from the development process and backwardness in critical aspects of human development such as education, health, economic stability, social security, and human dignity. It has its root in caste. However, the most significant challenge they face is the pre-existing cultural domination of Hindutva among the marginalized.

Buddhism gives space for the individual to think independently. Questioning is a fundamental character Ambedkarite possesses. If marginalized communities turn to Buddhism and Ambedkarism, they will question everything. It is a threat to the domination of privileged castes. They want the marginalized to remain ignorant. So, they started spreading rumors that *Mahars* were exploiting all the resources of deprived castes, taking all the benefits through the reservation, and leaving nothing for others. It is a ploy used by upper castes to widen the rift between two important castes among Dalits of Maharashtra. This kind of propaganda has remained the biggest

³⁴⁰ Rege, Sharmila. (2013). *Against the Madness of Manu: B.R. Ambedkar's writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy*. New Delhi: Navayana.

hurdle for efforts undertaken by social revolutionaries to spread community awareness. On the other hand, marginalized communities lack the resources.

Recently, the *Matang* community has started participating in Ambedkar Jayanti celebrations. They introduced Anna Bhau Sathe to *Matang* and started celebrating his birth anniversary as a counter to Ambedkar Jayanti, celebrated by *Mahar*. Activist leaders working with the community believe it is a ploy to divert the *Matang* community from being part of the Ambedkar Jayanti celebration and project Anna Bhau's birth anniversary celebration as a counter. There is no harm in it. However, it is creating rift and tension among these communities. Ajinkya Chandane says, "We have the challenge of not allowing this hatred against each other to grow further. Now we are working towards bridging the gap between them by bringing out the writings of Anna Bhau. In his essay, Anna Bhau says Ambedkar taught us to change this oppressive world by protesting it."³⁴¹ People accept this narrative, and joint Jayanti ventures are in practice in the Beed district. It results from political socialization activist missionaries are doing in the region.

Lahuji Wastad: Another refuge the opponent of the anti-caste movement took to divert the marginalized communities. When Ambedkar and Anna Bhau became a combination and reason for celebration, the opponent brought Lahuji Salve Wastad to polarize communities by making them caste icons. No doubt they are heroes of the marginalized. But the Brahmanical forces fuel the communal hatred against respective castes, which becomes a problem. To counter this communal propaganda, activists had to dig into history again. Lahuji Wastad took Mukta Salve to admit her to the first school for girls started by Mahatma Phule in India.

³⁴¹ Interview with Ajinkya Chandane on 7th May 2018.

Mukta is the first *Matang* girl who got formal education and was one of the first students of the first school opened for girls in India by revolutionary couple Savitribai and Mahatma Phule in Pune. Mukta is also the first writer from the *Matang* community to write about the deplorable condition of the untouchable castes in India under the Peshwa rule in Pune during the *Maratha* regime. Lahuji Salve used to train young boys in wrestling and make them participate in India's freedom struggle. He was the one who supported the efforts of Savitribai and Mahatma Phule to run schools for marginalized communities. Through these historical narratives, activists connected Lahuji Wastad to the anti-caste struggle.

These are some examples of struggles the community is going through. It is a more significant challenge. In circumstances where there is confusion about the connection between anti-caste icons and their contribution to the anti-caste movement, people believe the myths created around the Bahunjan icons as deities. Therefore, activist missionaries believe that mere rejection of legends is not enough as it must be countered and deny its validity in further references to Buddha as a Hindu deity. It also needs to be disputed and reclaimed. Efforts from the missionaries have been undergoing, and regularly they confront such attempts by creating alternatives to hegemonic Brahmanical culture.

The superstitious belief and blind faith of the community hold them back, trap them into this ritualistic life, and drive them away from developmental aspects to grow further in their life. The *Matang* community also has the tradition of *Potraj*- A god-man who has devoted his life to serving God, which keeps them away from formal education. For many people, this religious duty is their source of livelihood. *Potraj* keeps his hair long, wears colorful, feminine clothes, and begs for survival. It is a violation of dignity and respect for oneself. People used to spend their hard-earned money on religious sacrifices of animals.

Mangir Baba is another local deity located near Shendra village in the Aurangabad district of the Marathwada region. Around three lakh *Matang* people gather yearly at the Mangir Baba temple to celebrate his sacrifice day. There is a myth about Mangir Baba. It goes like this, Mangir Baba was a *Matang* person buried at the temple site during construction. It is believed that Hindus practiced sacrificing a *Matang* person alive at the construction sites of temples, bridges, and forts for its safety from evil spirits and to avoid any hurdle in its construction work. Brahmin priests tried to bury Mangir Baba at the time of temple construction, but he resisted and killed a few people to protect his own life. But eventually, he was defeated and buried alive.

It has become a religious site, and people gather to pray to the deity and seek his blessings. People sacrifice goats and chickens to Mangir Baba. People seek God's favor, and they offer sacrifices in return for fulfilling their wishes. One of the sacrificial practice people follow here is self-harming. People pierce themselves with needles. It is a barbaric practice; only marginalized castes follow it. Therefore, there is a need to revive the lost legacy of this site as a symbol of *Matang*'s resistance to Brahminic culture. Activists believe the actual word Mangir combines two words, "Mang and Veer," which means a brave Mang. So, DPI activists are propagating the counter-narrative in memory of his bravery.

They plan to erect a memorial named *Vijay Stambh*- a victory pillar. Like the history of Bhima Koregaon and *Vijay Stambh*, they plan to give an alternative to mythology. The purpose of this counter-narrative is to revive the brave history and get inspired from their glorious past. Mangir baba has been appropriated and made famous as a godlike figure by Brahmanical forces and propagates Hindu mythologies among *Matangs* to seek devotees to pray to him. However, DPI hopes to bring out and assert *Matang*'s bravery through Mangir Baba.

Another activity missionaries in Beed regularly organize in the public domain is rejecting *Wamana* and celebrating King Bali (See figure 5.11). It was the initiative of Hanumant Upare to reach out to the masses and educate them about Bahujan icons. It is an effort to reject what has been propagated by Brahmanical forces for centuries and reclaim the glorious past to revive Buddhist history in the present. Hanumant Upare invoked Phule's idea of *Bali Rajya* and concepts such as a native tribe. Upare calls all OBC castes the natives of the subcontinent, and Bali was their ancestor, and it further links them to the Buddhist past. Hanumant Upare called OBC castes as heirs of Buddhism.



Figure 5.11: Vaman Dahan Yatra, Beed.³⁴²

There are many challenges posed to the anti-caste ideology of Buddhism led by the Dalits in Maharashtra. Buddhism is not a closed entity. It differentiates from Hinduism because Hinduism is the religion of rules, whereas Buddhism offers principles. The religion of rules seeks to tell an

³⁴² Picture reproduced with permission from Sandeep Upare. Seen in the picture, Manisha Tai and Sandeep Upare lead the yatra.

agent just what course of action to pursue. At the same time, principles guide one's thinking flexibly but not predetermined manner. Therefore, Buddhism is a religion of principles. Though all the Buddhists in Maharashtra share the same references, the Dhamma, the Buddha, and Ambedkar, with flexibility in an offer to interpret Buddhist principles, there are different ways in which it has been interpreted, even among Ambedkarites.

Liberty to interpret Buddhism added other practices to Navayana Buddhism in Maharashtra. The fear of different interpretations of religious beliefs and practices can raise fragmentations and sects within the religion. That could lead to division and conflict among people. Communities had to face difficulties in life for choosing to contest inequality through Buddhist conversion. It was the result of the conflicting understanding of religion within their communities.

Conclusion:

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (2004:240) has argued that “the social order based on castes has withstood the resistance from the below and adjusted itself to maintain its structural integrity, ideological discipline, and political solidarity by overcoming and suppressing challenges to its fundamental power relations. It has supported its cultural hegemony and structural cohesion by frustrating reformists' endeavors by co-opting challenges of the then untouchables and marginalized dissidence.”³⁴³ Buddhist conversion movement among non-*Mahar* communities has seen a similar challenge. The survival and perpetuation of caste from generation to generation are solely due to

³⁴³ Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar. (2004). *Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Domination in Colonial Bengal*, New Delhi. Sage Publication.

the hegemony of the upper caste. In such circumstances, Buddhism has offered an umbrella identity to all fellow converts as Buddhists.

Indeed, a small section of society cannot annihilate caste. It requires a more extensive community base. However, the minority section also can eliminate caste and caste-related practices from their day-to-day life and lay a foundation for others to join the path leading to a casteless community. That is what the minority of oppressed castes are doing. They are giving up on caste-related occupations, rituals, and discriminatory practices and inventing alternative spaces and innovative cultures. In the process, women emerged as leaders and challenged the widely held belief that women should always be subordinate to men. The female Buddhist converts have abandoned the Brahmanical patriarchal caste system's assigned gender duties and taken a stand against oppression.

Buddhist women are at the forefront, drawing strength from Buddhist philosophy and reshaping and reconstructing their social, political, cultural, and biological conditions. Gail Omvedt (1971:1972)³⁴⁴ rightly pointed out what Phule sensed accurately: “if there was inequality in the family, there could be no true equality in society.” The oppression of women in traditional caste society went hand in hand with the suppression of untouchables and members of lower castes. In this context, Buddhism is essential because it offers an alternative worldview to the repressive caste system. This allows Buddhist women to transform themselves, ultimately transforming the community in which they live.

³⁴⁴ Omvedt, Gail. (1971). Jotirao Phule and the ideology of social revolution in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 6, No. 37, pp. 1969-1979.

Newly converted Buddhists formed their religious structures, invented new religious and ceremonial practices, etc. It is primarily a contribution of *Mahars* converted to Buddhism as they were the predominant caste who converted to Buddhism. Festivals, rituals, and unique places historically crucial for the Ambedkarite movement invented by them also link with the historic struggle of Dr. Ambedkar, a *Mahar* by a caste of origin. As a result of *Mahar* domination in Buddhism, the non-*Mahar* caste could not relate to these traditions. Therefore, the difference between *Mahar*'s and non-*Mahars* experience of Buddhist conversion is that non-*Mahars* faced internal opposition to their conversion decision.

When the converted Buddhist population is not restricted to one caste and includes various castes along with their cultural heritage, it becomes a more significant challenge for the new religious community to maintain the balance between continuity and change in their cultural aspects. Therefore, in this context, the innovations and revival of non-*Mahar* legacies of anti-caste struggles and myths have dealt with the issues and challenges they face in maintaining the balance of continuity and change in the culture. The mixing of new traditions was the significant contribution of non-*Mahar* Buddhist converts.

Conclusion

Universalizing Regional Leadership and Local Mobilization- The Anti-caste model of the Ambedkarite Buddhist movement of the Marathwada Region

Introduction:

Religious notions underlie the practice of untouchability and discrimination against Dalits. Despite modernization and constitutional protections, individual attitudes regarding caste practices have not changed. At this point, the significance of religion in changing social order from a discriminatory society to an equal society is explored. Ambedkar, a representative of oppressed groups in India, decided to convert to Buddhism as a different strategy to combat caste. In India and Maharashtra, Buddhist discourse is primarily seen as a form of resistance and the emancipation of the *Mahar* caste, one of the previous untouchable castes. The contempt for former untouchables has reduced Buddhism to that of the *Mahar* religion, as Ambedkar himself was a *Mahar*. Therefore, accusations also come against *Mahar's* dominance in Buddhism in Maharashtra and receive criticism that *Mahars* have reduced Buddhism to their caste.

The Buddhist conversion movement has been disregarded by calling it ineffective for not succeeding in eliminating the caste from society; therefore, it is also perceived as the failure of Buddhism. The opponents of religious conversion also speak for reforming discriminatory religious notions. They argue that conversion is not the solution to caste-based discrimination. They delegitimized the efforts of the anti-caste movement by putting the entire burden of caste annihilation on the oppressed castes. It has been also demonstrated that one single caste could not fight the demon-like caste and eradicate the caste.

Down the timeline, conversion to Buddhism is taken up as means to fight the caste system by various non-*Mahar* communities. Therefore, this thesis has focused on non-*Mahar* castes, who went on to challenge the rigid caste structures that led to the small-scale revolutions happening in the everydayness of their life. The recent conversions in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra from non-*Mahar* castes are reviving the significance of Buddhism as an emancipatory religion in the struggle against the oppressive caste system. These conversions carry a strong desire to create a casteless society. They represented different social groups constitutionally, categorized as SC, ST, and OBC. The major caste and tribe groups covered are *Matang (Mang)*, *Charmakar (Chambhar)*, *Valmiki (Mehetar)*, *Mali*, *Lingayat*, *Bhavasara*, *Dhangar*, *Yellam*, *Gurav*, *Bhilla*, *Kaikadi*, *Paradhi*, etc. The names of the castes mentioned here are only for informative purposes and denote their representation in the conversion movement. It does not intend to use these names contemptuously, as castes in India are hierarchical.

These plural narratives of recent converts have been explored in this thesis to understand the possibilities of shared ambitions in making a casteless society and how conversion to Buddhism is a significant step towards it. These plural narratives of how activist missionaries took Buddhism to non-*Mahar* communities make the conversion among non-*Mahar* communities a unique case. This study, therefore, counters the claim that conversion further brought another category among ex-untouchable castes and separated them from non-converted castes.

The thesis mainly focuses on the anti-caste movement and Buddhist conversion among non-*Mahar* communities from the Marathwada region, Beed district, and adjacent districts of Beed. Marginalized communities have limited resources and cannot reach out to the vast geography of Maharashtra with those resources. However, they take inspiration from Mahatma Phule and Shahu Maharaj. They primarily have worked among their localities and regions.

However, their missionary work of taking Ambedkarism and Buddhism to the masses has been appreciated and replicated in Maharashtra and India.

Activist missionaries in the Marathwada region have demonstrated a model that can be replicated in Maharashtra and India. Through the activist missionary model, regional autonomous leadership takes charge of a particular area and works amongst people in their communities. That makes reaching out to more people from different social backgrounds and the remotest regions easier. The centrality of their missionary work revolves around Buddhism as the native religion. Therefore, it is believed that all the marginalized castes were once Buddhist before the Brahmanical Vedic religion took over. Hence, they are claiming their original identity as Buddhists through conversion to Buddhism and creating their own culture and tradition. The chapters in this thesis developed upon this unique socio-religious movement and demonstrated these arguments.

Summary of Chapters:

The Introduction chapter gives an overview of the research. It contextualizes the topic and states the objectives, research questions, area of research, and methodology. **The first chapter** critically engages with available literature and discusses caste, religion, and conversion studies. This chapter critiques colonial intervention and the decolonial perspective on caste studies (Dumont, 1970; Dirks, 2003; Srinivas, 1993; Bandyopadhyay, 2004). At the same time, it has emphasized Ambedkar's anthropological interpretation of caste, which became an epistemological critique of caste and went beyond the post-colonial understanding of caste as a colonial construction (Nigam, 2000; Jodhka, 2018; Raj, 2022). While dealing with early challenges to caste society, this chapter dealt with the *Bhakti* tradition, which showed the path of an egalitarian society and impacted communities (Zellior, 1992; Burchett, 2009; Jodhka & Kumar, 2010; Omvedt & Patankar, 2012;

Braj Ranjan Mani, 2015). Colonial intervention in pre-independence India highlighted changes brought about by colonial modernity (Rai, 1979; Omvedt, 2008; Beltz, 2005). Further, it discussed anti-caste modes of protesting caste through social reform movement (Juergensmeyer, 1974; Braj Ranjan Mani, 2015; Aloysius, 2015).

In this attempt, the chapter addressed the efforts of Christian missionaries in converting marginalized communities. It highlighted the caste as socially or politically permitted in individual and private spaces of masses in India and continued to play a significant role in determining social relationships (Robinson, 2003; Clarke, 2003; Louis, 2007; Deshpande & Bapna, 2008; Viswanath, 2013; Forrester, 2017). It also highlighted the question of Caste and Sub-caste among new converts (Fuller, 1976; Alexander, 1998; Lobo, 2001; Robinson, 2010; and Mosse, 2012). The chapter concludes by underlining the Dalit converts' view of changing religion as a way of coping, resisting, and surviving oppression (Jaffrelot, 2004). Apart from all these, religion has offered Dalits a healing mechanism for the psychological consequences of oppression. Therefore, this chapter attempted to locate the Buddhist conversion movement into a broader anti-caste movement in India and connected it with various efforts taken by different social movements to counter caste (Zelliot, 1996; Omvedt, 2003; Jaffrelot, 2004; Beltz, 2005).

The second chapter discussed the theoretical underpinnings of religion and conversion and their applicability to Buddhism. The analytical framework primarily revolves around multiple ways of understanding religion from Dr. Ambedkar's (2004) perspective and his theorization of Buddhist conversion in India. Dr. Ambedkar used the functional approach to understand religion. The functionalist approach to religion helps us understand how religion creates social order to maintain social harmony. Dr. Ambedkar's (1992) approach to religion in his text *Buddha and his*

Dhamma resonates with Durkheim's (1995) idea of religion that religion is eminently social and binds people together.

The conversion to Buddhism here is understood as a process. It is considered a self-realization of reasons for human suffering and breaking away from those responsible for suffering in human life in the search for salvation (Brekke, 2002). In this process, internal and external factors contribute to reaching the final conversion decision. In the present case, along with individual consciousness, activist missionaries play an essential role. The marginalized community rejects the oppressor castes' ideological hegemony citing it as the reason for their sufferings. It denies hegemonic religion the possibility to co-opt them as a sect among the pan-religious identity of Hindus.

Dumont's (1980) approach has been used to understand further the changing relationship between culture and its associated values post-conversion. Conversion to new religion always comes after another culture and tradition of the past. Most of the time, parts of that past remain valuable even after conversion. Dumont (1980)³⁴⁵ suggests that people prioritize cultural changes in such situations. They do that through hierarchical arrangements of cultural elements. The less valued cultural elements come to be reduced and restricted, and it does not contradict more valued elements. Dumont calls more valued elements in hierarchical arrangements of culture the “paramount value” of culture. In Dumont’s model of culture, every culture is dominated by a paramount value delineating its structure in its broadest outline.

³⁴⁵ Quoted in Robbins, Joel. (2009). Conversion, Hierarchy, and Cultural Change: Value and Syncretism in the Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. In Rio, Kunt M and Smedal, Olaf H. (eds), *Hierarchy: Persistence and Transformation in Social Formations*. Berghahn Books.

While applying this analytical framework, we can understand Buddhism came into existence as a counter-culture to the oppressive Brahmanical culture at the time of Buddha. Even at its revival, it emerged as an alternative to Hinduism for Dalits in India when Dr. Ambedkar led the conversion movement to Buddhism in 1956. In this conversion, the caste system's paramount value got replaced with Buddhism's paramount values, such as principles of equality and fraternity. Therefore, conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism also means there should be a shift in the paramount values. Therefore, it is crucial to assess whether there has been a genuine change in values since Dalits embraced Buddhism, a religion that affirms the value of every individual as a human being, upholds equality, provides the advantages of liberty, and fosters fraternity.

The third chapter dealt with the post-Ambedkar development of the Ambedkarite anti-caste movement in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra. It discusses the journey of non-*Mahar* leaders in becoming Ambedkarite and further taking the ideology of Ambedkarism to their respective communities. The contemporary Buddhist conversion movement in India, in general, emerged not from an organized top-down missionary intervention. It revolves around several historical events and movements parallelly, which has a direct-indirect impact on generations to come and the mobilization of the masses. Marathwada, as the region, has seen several events and movements like BAMCEF and Namantar Movement. The violence inflicted upon the Dalit community post-Namantar event significantly impacted the development of anti-caste leadership in the region. It works as the motivating factor for the community, giving rise to autonomous movements politicizing the communities. This chapter addressed the historical context and how non-*Mahar* castes, who avoided the conversion movement, became part of it.

The chapter further highlighted the importance of autonomous institutions founded by Dr. Ambedkar in producing an educated intellectual class among the marginalized community.

Educational institutions like Milind college and the hostel run by the Peoples Education Society founded by Dr. Ambedkar also significantly impacted the anti-caste movement in the Marathwada region. Several scholars, activists, and civilians working in Maharashtra's anti-caste movement are from PES. They went on to make a big difference in society through their humanitarian work in the anti-caste movement. Leaders like Adv Eknath Awad, GS Dada Kamble, Hanumant Upare, and Aatmaram Chandane have significantly impacted the region's anti-caste movement. Therefore, this chapter has described the impact of such movements on developing anti-caste leadership in the Marathwada region. It also explains how they took on the responsibility to carry forward Ambedkar's vision of Bauddhamay Bharat (Buddhist India) in their communities.

The fourth chapter elaborately discussed the organized efforts of activists and leaders from non-*Mahar* communities in propagating anti-caste thoughts. It began to mobilize people with the clear agenda of convincing them of the Buddhist conversion in the Marathwada region. This chapter has dealt with the various strategies and means for reaching out to the masses by activist missionaries for bringing their communities into the fold of Buddhism. They problematize the caste and mobilize the communities around the experiences of exclusion and discrimination based on their cultural and social identity. Every caste has reasons for taking conversion as a form of protest or even not to ally with the anti-caste movement, stay away from Buddhist conversion discourse. Therefore, this chapter deals with plural narratives of rejection of the discriminatory culture of caste and conversion to Buddhism as one of the solutions they have found. The ethnicization of caste is one of the key tactics' activists used in mobilizing and politicizing individuals across caste lines. Therefore, this chapter further attempted to engage with ethno-emancipatory movements in the Marathwada region. This chapter has briefly analyzed statistical data about the respondents' demographic details. It has also linked the data with ground realities

and drawn inferences about differences in responses of different communities regarding their participation in the conversion movement and their socio-cultural background. So, the fourth chapter explores the different approaches of distinct caste groups from diverse social backgrounds and narrates their 'experience' of conversion.

The fifth chapter deals with the post-conversion challenges to the new Buddhist community. It seeks to explain how the converted Buddhists' thoughts, beliefs, and actions led to the reconstruction of the society from the anti-caste perspective of annihilation of caste and how it has been reflected in the contemporary anti-caste movement in Maharashtra. Challenging the dominant/hegemonic culture based on caste is a separate struggle that new converts undergo. Therefore, this chapter also addressed the ritualistic changes the community has undergone post-conversion. The chapter further evaluated the role of individual and system change, which aims for social change through protesting caste and inequalities in Buddhist culture.

Scholars have positioned Buddhism and assumed it challenges the gender-based discrimination embedded in Brahmanical patriarchy. In this context, it is essential to see how the issue of inequality and discrimination based on gender is dealt with in Buddhism. It further narrated the experiences of Buddhist women about breaking the caste boundaries and recorded their experiences of changes Buddhism brought into their life and the society they live. The oppression of women in traditional caste society went hand in hand with the suppression of untouchables and members of lower castes. In this context, Buddhism is essential because it offers an alternative worldview to the repressive caste system. This allows Buddhist women to transform themselves, ultimately transforming the community in which they live. Therefore, the chapter discussed the alliance between feminists and anti-caste ideas in the fold of Buddhism to liberate women followers from oppression.

Significance of the study:

This thesis on the Buddhist conversion movement among *Matang (Mang)*, *Charmakar (Chambhar)*, *Valmiki (Mehetar)*, *Mali*, *Lingayat*, *Bhavasara*, *Dhangar*, *Yellam*, *Gurav*, *Bhilla*, *Kaikadi*, *Paradhi*, etc. non-*Mahar* communities in Maharashtra contributes to different areas of scholarship. Primarily it adds to the existing literature on the anti-caste movement from a methodological point of view. It gives voice to the non-*Mahar* perspective in the anti-caste discourse in Maharashtra. It further documents the ongoing anti-caste movements and activities undertaken by activist missionaries. It highlights charismatic leadership as the foundation of organized activist missionaries. It highlights the different expressions of anti-caste traditions and cultures in contemporary Buddhist discourse in Maharashtra.

An attempt has been made here to counter the argument of opponents of conversion that religious conversion is violence against the peaceful, non-missionary Hindu religion and its culture. It has demonstrated through this thesis that conversion, in particular to Buddhism, is an umbrella identity for people divided into different castes. It is an egalitarian alternative to the violent and unequal caste culture of discrimination and oppression. This thesis has demonstrated that activists have used a historical method to revive Buddhism by invoking Bhakti traditions, social reformers, and the revolution of Buddha against Brahmanical social order to revive Buddhism.

Going through the narratives of the non-*Mahar* Buddhist converts and their struggle was particularly significant for the study to learn and understand the modes of engagement with Buddhist discourse and their challenges. It is discussed how communities, leaders, and lay people draw inspiration from their lived experiences and interweave those experiences with the changing

socio-religious life of marginalized communities. They further created a network of activists, Buddhist institutions, monks, and lay people for the Buddhist conversion, taking it beyond caste boundaries.

Ambedkar (2014: 217) argued that “society can practice tyranny and oppression against an individual to a far greater degree than a government can. The means and scope open to society for oppression are more extensive than those open to Government; also, they are far more effective.”³⁴⁶ Hence, acceptance of change is always a complex process. However, marginalized communities show outstanding flexibility in accepting self-imposed change and differentiating themselves from those who become part of the unconscious change around them. The new Buddhist community stands out as a unique group that consciously embraces change from those unwilling to change. It is a courageous decision of the community as they risk changing long-standing cultures and traditions.

Major Findings:

Due to their former status as untouchables, the *Mahar*, *Matang*, and *Charmakar* castes have always been treated as outcasts. However, Mahars were the only ones who essentially converted to Buddhism. The proximity of Dr. Ambedkar to his community as a *Mahar* might be a significant factor. It is well known that charismatic leaders tend to have the most significant impact on people who belong to their own caste. Even while *Mahars* made a substantial contribution to the resurgence of Buddhism in Maharashtra, they were also confined to *Mahar* converts.

³⁴⁶ Ambedkar, B.R. (2014). *Ranade, Gandhi and Jinha*, in Babasaheb Ambedkar writings and Speeches, Vol. 1.

One can ostensibly say that people are converting to other religions in general and Buddhism in particular because they face discrimination. However, scholars have demonstrated that the communities are experiencing discrimination and even atrocities for an extended period across India. Even so, not every victim of atrocities or discrimination is conscious of why they are victimized. As a result, victims do not take conversion to another religion as a form of protest. Most of the victims remained caste members even after they faced discrimination. Those who took religious conversion as the mode of their protest relate to the anti-caste movement either through literature or the reach of anti-caste activist missionaries.

Of late, there has been a realization that Buddha's social order is more human and egalitarian as such educated non-*Mahar* castes have been turning to Buddhism. One of the primary reasons for the non-*Mahar* caste conversion to Buddhism could also be attributed to activist missionaries. To make one think and realize subordination and an inhuman lifeworld, one must reintroduce the thoughts of the anti-caste movement, Buddha, and Ambedkar. It needs to be propagated and reach the masses. Community leaders from non-*Mahar* communities, such as Adv Eknath Awad, G.S. Dada Kamble, Aatmaram Chandane, and Hanumant Upare in the Marathwada region, were instrumental in taking the Buddhist egalitarian zeal to the non-*Mahar* communities.

However, this research also shows that ex-untouchable castes categorized as SC still dominate the Buddhist conversion movement, even among the non-*Mahars* in Maharashtra. The reason for the same could be traced back to the graded inequality in the caste hierarchy and the degree of oppression they face, as most converts give caste oppression as the reason for their decision to convert from Hinduism. The castes ranked higher in the caste hierarchy were less interested in conversion. As non-*Mahar* castes, OBC communities were also victims of caste oppression. Still, they did not readily admire Buddhist ideology as a means of protest and

emancipation. The experience of caste oppression is lesser for the castes ranked higher in order and harsher for castes lower in order. Therefore, we find more Buddhist converts in the SC category as they are the lowest in the caste hierarchy compared to the OBC castes.

However, OBC leaders like Hanumant Upare put Mahatma Phule's exploitation theory into practice to mobilize OBCs. Upare linked cultural and ethnic factors to the economic and political problems of OBCs. He believed that OBCs were natives of this land and were Buddhist in the past. The mainstay of this movement is Phule's *Sarvajanik Satya dharma*. Activist missionaries further connect the Phule and Ambedkar. Phule's Satya dharma became a connecting thread between Buddha's Dhamma and other marginalized castes, culminating in their conversion to Buddhism.

After conversion, the non-*Mahar* communities followed the cultural practices of the Buddhist social order like that of *Mahar* converts. Sometimes it was also found that these non-*Mahar* converts are seen as more Buddhist in their practices than the *Mahar* converts. It was also observed that the non-converts from non-*Mahar* communities are gradually getting inspired by the lives of converts. It also creates pressure on converted Buddhists from the *Mahar* community to not fall back on their Hindu traditions and practice Buddhist traditions with honesty.

There was always a feeling of hostility between the different castes. Still, with constant efforts from activists and community leaders, things have changed for the better. Activist missionaries are working on the ground to spread awareness. It took time, but people are changing and awakening. Ambedkarite discourse is shaping their thoughts. People from different castes, for instance, the *Mahar*, *Matang*, *Charmakar*, *Tribes*, and *OBC* communities from villages, have started celebrating Ambedkar Jayanti together. The tension between these castes is reducing. People have started accepting each other. Newly converted Buddhists from non-*Mahar*

communities get much respect among Buddhists. They do not see the caste of origin but the current status as Buddhist. Through the conversion, the lower caste communities and leaders registered their protests and asserted their equal status.

As in the case of *Mahars*, post-conversion, they are also facing the problem of untouchability. However, the difference is that the Buddhist converts are conscious of their independent entity, dignity, and freedom of choice. Therefore, they have achieved freedom of mind through their conversion to Buddhism. It has also created new consciousness among the upper caste that they cannot take the converts for granted, even though they do not admit it openly.

Anti-caste movement in Maharashtra has provoked the non-Brahman dominant castes through its literature and constant engagement with social issues of various castes. It has an impact on progressive people belonging to these communities. The *Maratha Seva Sangha* and *Sambhaji Brigade* took a religious path to mobilize and awaken the *Maratha* caste for cultural change. *Martha Seva Sangha* founded *Shiv Dharma* with the vision of freedom from inequality and caste. The philosophy of *Shiv Dharma* believes that the Brahminical Vedic religion is working to create a split in society by confusing the public mind by dividing them into separate castes. The movements like *Shiva Dharma* are gaining popularity among the *Maratha* caste. Organizations like *Maratha Seva Sangha* and *Sambhaji Brigade* organize *Maratha* youth based on Chhatrapati Shivaji and his ideas of unity among people and challenge Brahmanical hegemonies in the cultural domain.

Limitations of the study and future directions:

Even though this thesis has tried to cover most of the aspects of the research, there might be some lacunae due to Ph.D. as a time-framed project. It had constraints of pandemic restrictions,

economic support for the fieldwork, and the vastness of the field in the geographical sense. Getting access to people and gaining their trust is a complex and lengthy process. Since the research focuses on Buddhist converts from non-*Mahar* communities, it engaged explicitly with them. The important thing that could not be covered through this research is the representation of those who did not participate in the conversion movement and remained outside, furthermore, how the existing Buddhist community stood with the conversion or what they thought about it.

A comparison cannot be drawn about the change conversion has brought in the lives of individuals and communities because change is time-consuming and the short period of conversion events. Ideally, one decade of conversion experience of communities is a minimal time to compare. However, comparisons can be made between converted and non-converted people from different castes and the same caste regarding what made them take that call of conversion. Further, the social relation between old and new converts could only be observed in limited numbers.

Though researchers could get access to women activists and record their life narratives about their experiences; however, women converts and their agency to decide for conversion is another area that has not been explored in much detail. Patriarchal society has subjugated women and their agency. Though women are party to religious rituals and maintaining religious boundaries, questions were always raised about their ability to make crucial life decisions, such as conversion. The Ambedkarite Buddhist movement has a remarkable presence of women; nevertheless, very few women activists are working full-time compared to men. Community men head most organizations working on the ground in the anti-caste movement. It needs to be further explored regarding what is happening with women's participation in the anti-caste movement.

During the fieldwork, it has also been observed that a few activists and leaders from communities considered privileged castes are active in the non-Brahmanic movement among the *Maratha* caste. *Maratha Seva Sangha*, particularly, is leading this non-Brahmanic movement among the *Maratha* community based on Chhatrapati Shivaji and his idea of unity among people. They are giving alternatives to Vedic rituals and introducing *Shiva Dharma* rituals, excluding Brahmin priests from the ritualistic life of the community. Mainly people from the *Maratha* community are followers of *Shiv Dharma*.

So far Buddhist conversion movement has been explored from the perspective of oppressed communities. Including the narratives of this thesis, conversion experiences are limited to marginalized communities. *Shiv Dharma* has offered similar trajectories as that of the anti-caste movement. Therefore, it will be interesting to see connections between the anti-caste movement of contemporary Maharashtra emerging from oppressed communities and privileged communities. A comparative exploration of such narratives could be done.

WORKS CONSULTED

- Aga, A. (2019). The Marketing of corporate agrichemicals in Western India: Theorizing graded informality, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 7, 1458-1476.
- Ahir, D.C. (1994). *Dr. Ambedkar on Buddhism*. New Delhi: Dalit Upsurge.
- Ahir, D.C. (1998). *Dr. Ambedkar's Vision of Dhamma: An Assessment*. Delhi: B.R. Publishing.
- Aloysius, G. (2015). *Iyothee Thassar and Tamil Buddhist Movement: Religion as Emancipatory Identity*. New Delhi: Critical Quest.
- Alexander, K.C. (1998). The Neo Christians of Kerala. In Michael Mahar, J. (Ed.). *The Untouchables in Contemporary India*, Jaipur: Rawat Publication.
- Ambedkar, B R. (1979). *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 1*. Mumbai: Government of Maharashtra, Education Department.
- Ambedkar, B.R. (1992). *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 11*. Mumbai: Government of Maharashtra, Education Department.
- Ambedkar, B.R. (2004). *Conversion as emancipation*. New Delhi: Critical Quest.
- Ambedkar, B.R. (2013). *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part-1*. Mumbai: Government of Maharashtra, Education Department.
- Ambedkar, B.R. (2013). *Castes in India: their mechanism, genesis, and development*. New Delhi: Critical Quest.

- Ambedkar, B.R. (2014a). *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 3*. Mumbai: Government of Maharashtra, Education Department.
- Ambedkar, B.R. (2014b), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17, Part II*. Mumbai: Government of Maharashtra, Education Department.
- Ambedkar, B.R. (2016). *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol.5*. Mumbai: Government of Maharashtra, Education Department.
- Ambedkar, B.R. (2020). *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 17. Part III*. Mumbai: Government of Maharashtra, Education Department.
- Atkinson, P. and Hammersley, M. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. Routledge.
- Atyachar Virodh Samiti. (1979). The Marathwada Riots: A Report. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 14, No. 19, 845-852.
- Awad, E. (2018). *Strike a Blow to Change the World*, trans. Jerry pinto. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Publication.
- BAMCEF Organization. (2022). <http://bamceforg.in/index.php/home-what-is-the-meaning-of-bamcef/>
Accessed on 12th October 2021.
- Bandyopadhyay, S. (2004). *Caste, Culture, and Hegemony: social domination in colonial Bengal*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Beltz, J. (2004). Contesting Caste, Hierarchy, and Hinduism: Buddhist discursive practice in Maharashtra. In S. Jondhale & J. Beltz (Eds.), *Reconstructing the world: B R Ambedkar and Buddhism in India* (245-266). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

- Beltz, J. (2005). *Mahar, Buddhist, and Dalit: religious conversion and socio-political emancipation*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Beltz, J. (2006). Dalit Buddhism: Re-evaluating the category. *Dalit- International News Letter*, 1-11.
- Berger, P.L. (2012). Further Thoughts on Religion and Modernity. *Soc.* 49, 313–316.
- Berger, P. & Sahoo, S. (Eds.). (2020). *Godroads: Modalities of Conversion in India*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press.
- Brekke, T. (2002). *Religious Motivation and the Origins of Buddhism: A social-psychological exploration of the origins of a world religion*. New York: Routledge.
- Brekke, T. (2003). Conversion in Buddhism? In S. Clarke, & R. Robinson (Eds.), *Religious Conversion in India: Modes, Motivations, and Meanings* (181-191). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Brekke, T. (2017). *Religious Motivation and the Origins of Buddhism: A Social Psychological Exploration of the Origins of a world religion*. New York: Routledge.
- Buckser, A and Glazier, S. D. (Ed.). (2003). *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Burchett, Patton. (2009). Bhakti Rhetoric in the Hagiography of ‘Untouchable’ Saint: Discerning Bhakti’s Ambivalence on Caste and Brahminhood. *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 115-141.

- Chakravarti, U. (2004). Is Buddhism the Answer to Brahmanical Patriarchy? In S. Jondhale & J. Beltz (Eds.), *Reconstructing the World: B R Ambedkar and Buddhism in India (186-202)*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Darokar, S; Subodh, N.W. & Bodhi, S.R. (2022). *Navayana Buddhism: Context, Debates, and Theories*. Hyderabad: The Shared Mirror.
- Deshpande, A. (2014, December 29). 6000 OBCs to embrace Buddhism. *The Hindu*.
<https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/Buddhism-our-real-home-Maharashtra-OBCs/article60091723.ece> Accessed on 22 October 2022.
- Deshpande, S. & Bapna, G. (2008). *Dalits in Muslim and Christian Communities- A Study Report on Current Social Scientific Knowledge*. Prepared for National Commission for Minorities, Government of India
- Dhammasangini, R. (2011). *Maharashtratil Baudh Striyanchya moukhik Etihache Strivadi Akalan* (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis in Marathi). Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune.
- Dirks, N. (2003). *Caste of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.
- Dumont, L. (1979). *Homo Hierarchicus*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Durkheim, E. (1995). *The elementary forms of religious life*. New York: The Free Press.
- Fereday, J., & Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006). Demonstrating Rigor Using Thematic Analysis: A Hybrid Approach of Inductive and Deductive Coding and Theme Development. *International Journal of Qualitative Research*, Vol. 5, Issue 1. 80-92.
- Fiske, A.M. (1969). Religion and Buddhism among India's new Buddhists. *Social Research*, Vol. 36, No.1, 123-157.

- Fitzgerald, T. (1997). Ambedkar Buddhism in Maharashtra. *Contribution to Indian Sociology*. 31, (2). 225-251.
- Fitzgerald, T. (2004). Analyzing Sects, Minorities, and Social Movement in India: The Case of Ambedkar Buddhism and Dalit(s). In S. Jondhale & J. Beltz (Eds.), *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India* (267-282). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Forrester, D. B. (2017). *Caste and Christianity: Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions in India*. New York: Routledge.
- Fuller, C. J. (1976). Kerala Christians and the Caste System, *Man*, 11, (1), 53-70.
- Fuchs, M. (2004). Buddhism and Dalitness: Dilemmas of Religious Emancipation. In S. Jondhale & J. Beltz (Eds.), *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India* (283-300). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Ghadage, T. (2015). *Multiple Religious Identities among Dalits and Implication of Atrocity Act: Case of Mahars from Rural Maharashtra*. (Unpublished MPhil thesis), Department of Anthropology, University of Hyderabad.
- Ghadage, T. (2020). Ambedkarites in Making: The Process of awakening and Conversion to Buddhism among Non-Mahar communities in Maharashtra. *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*. Vol. 1, No. 2, 107-120. DOI: 10.26812/caste.v1i2.220
- Gokhale, J. (1986). The Socio-political Effects of Ideological Change: The Buddhist Conversion of Maharashtrian Untouchables, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 2, 269-292.
- Gore, M.S. (1993). *The Social Context of an Ideology*. Delhi: Sage Publication.

- Guru, G. (1991). Hinduisation of Ambedkar in Maharashtra, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 26, No. 7, 339-341.
- Guru, G. (1995). One Dimensional view of Dalit Movement, book review article. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 98-102.
- Guru, G., & Sarukkai, S. (2012). *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Guru, Gopal. (2016). The Indian Nation in its Egalitarian Conception. In R. Rawat & K. Satyanarayana (Eds.), *Dalit Studies* (31-49). London: Duke University Press.
- Hardtmann, E.M. (2009). *The Dalit Movement in India: Local Practices, Global Connections*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Huynh, T. (2013). Why Did Ambedkar Choose Buddhism to Liberate His depressed Classes? In C. Mun & R. Green (Eds.), *Living in Peace: Insights from Buddhism*. Honolulu: Blue Pine.
- Ilaiah, K. (2006). Merit of Reservations, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 41, No. 24, 2447-2449.
- Jaffrelot, Christophe. (2005). *Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste*. London: Hurst and Company.
- Javale, A. (2013). *Padagham: Sanskrutik Nishthhantarache*. Mumbai: Navata Books.
- Jodhka, S. & Kumar, A. (2010). Religious Mobilization for development and Social Change: A Comparative Study of Dalit Movement in Punjab and Maharashtra, India. *Religion and*

Development Research Program, Working Paper- 47, International Development Department, University of Birmingham. 1-101.

Jodhka, Surinder. (2018). *Caste in Contemporary India*. New York: Routledge.

Jore, Dharmendra. (2007, May 9). Nation's largest conversion at racecourse. *Hindustan Times*.

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/nation-s-largest-conversion-at-racecourse/story-8ZTI7mXsthOPByXrzBF6sL.html> Accessed on 22 October 2022.

Juergensmeyer, M. (1974). *Political Hope: The Quest for Political Identity and Strategy in the Social Movement of North India's Untouchables, 1900-1970* (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis). Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley.

Juergensmeyer, M. (2009). *Religious rebels in Punjab- The Ad Dharm challenge to caste*. New Delhi: Navayana.

Kadam, S. (2020). *Ambedkari Chalvalitil Matang Samaj*. Mumbai: Lokvangmaya Grih.

Keer, D. (1981). *Dr Ambedkar Life and Mission*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.

Kurane, A. (1999). *Ethnic Identity and Social Mobility*. Jaipur: Rawat Publication.

Leonard, D. (2017). *Casteless Community: Iyothee Thass (1845-1914) and Tamil Buddhism*. (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis). Centre for Comparative Literature, University of Hyderabad.

Lobo, L. (2001). Vision, Illusion, and Dilemmas of Dalit Christians in India. In G. Shah (Ed.). *Dalit Identity and Politics: Cultural Subordination and Dalit Challenges*, Vol. II. New Delhi: Sage Publication.

Mane, L. (2020, June 26). Facebook Live video of Laxman Mane streamed on 'Matang, Charmakar, and OBC- Chalo Buddha ki Aur' Facebook page.

<https://www.facebook.com/100003182016684/videos/3092112174238153/> Accessed on 20th June 2020.

Mani, B.R. (2015). *Debrahmanising History: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society*. Manohar: New Delhi.

Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. (2011). Census of India.

<https://censusindia.gov.in/census.website/data/population-finder> Accessed on 22 October 2022.

Mosse, D. (2012). *The Saint in the Banyan Tree: Christianity and Caste Society in India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Narasu, L. P. (2004). The rationality of Buddhism. In Sharma, S. K. and Sharma, U. (Eds.), *Cultural and religious heritage of India, Volume 3: Buddhism*. New Delhi: Mittal Publications.

Narayan, B. (2014). *Kanshiram: Leader of the Dalits*. New Delhi: Penguin.

Neundorf, A & Smets, K. (2015). *Political Socialization and Making of Citizens*. In Oxford Handbooks Editorial Board, *Oxford Handbook Topics in Politics* (online edn, Oxford Academic, 6 Aug. 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935307.001.0001>, accessed 15 Oct. 2022.

Omvedt, G. (1971). Jotirao Phule and the ideology of social revolution in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 6(37), 1969-1979.

- Omvedt, G. (2003). *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and caste*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Omvedt, G. (2008). *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anti-caste Intellectuals*. Navayana Publications: New Delhi.
- Omvedt, G. (2011). *Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond*. Hyderabad: Orient Black Swan.
- Omvedt, G. & Patankar, B. (Eds.). (2012). *The Songs of Tukoba*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Paik, S. (2007). *Daughters of the Lesser God: Dalit Women's Education in Postcolonial Pune* (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis). The University of Warwick.
- Paik, S. (2011). Mahar-Dalit-Buddhist: The history and politics of naming in Maharashtra. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 45(2), 217–241.
- Paik, S. (2014). *Dalit women's Education in Modern India: Double Discrimination*. New York: Routledge.
- Pandian, M.S.S. (1996). Towards National-Popular: Notes on self-Respecters Tamil. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 31, (51), 3323-3329.
- Pawar, J.V. (2017). *Dalit Panthers: An Authoritative History*. New Delhi: Marginalized Publication. Translated from Marathi by Rakshit Sonavane.
- Pawar, U. & Moon, M. (2008). *We also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*. (Translation by Sonalkar, Wandana). New Delhi: Zubaan.

- Phule, J. (2006). *Mahatma Phule Samagra Vangmaya*. Maharashtra Rajya Sahitya ani Sanskruti Mandal, Mumbai. Edited by Keer, Dhananjay; Malashe, S.G; & Phadake, Yashavanta.
- Qin, W. (2000). *The Buddhist Revival in Post-Mao China: Women Reconstruct Buddhism on Mt. Emei* (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis). Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Queen, C. S. (1994). Ambedkar, Modernity, and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation, In A.K. Narain & D.C. Ahir (Eds.). *Dr. Ambedkar's Buddhism and Social Change*. Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation.
- Rai, K. (1979). British Attitude Towards Social Reforms in Modern India. *Indian History Congress*, Vol. 40, 904-907.
- Raj, J. (2022). Post-colonial Caste, Ambedkar, and the politics of counter-narrative. *History and Anthropology*, Vol.33, No. 2, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2022.2096021>
- Ram, R. (2012). Beyond Conversion and Sanskritization: Articulating an Alternative Dalit Agenda in East Punjab. *Modern Asian Studies*, 46, (3), 639-702.
- Rao, A. (2013). *The caste question: Dalits and politics of modern India*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.
- Rao, Yogita. (2016, April 14). Rohith's mom and brother to embrace Buddhism. *The Times of India*. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/rohiths-mom-and-brother-to-embrace-buddhism/articleshow/51818828.cms> Accessed on 20th April 2016.
- Rawat, R. S. & Satyanarayana, K. (Eds.), (2016). *Dalit Studies*. London: Duke University Press.

- Rebecca, S. N. (2003). Converting to What? Embodied Culture and the Adoption of New Beliefs. In A. Buckser & S. Glazier (Eds.). *Anthropology of Religious Conversion* (171-181). Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.
- Rege, S. (2013). *Against the Madness of Manu: B.R. Ambedkar's writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy*. New Delhi: Navayana.
- Roberts, N. (2016). *To Be Cared for: The power of conversion and foreignness of belonging in an Indian slum*. New Delhi: Navayana.
- Robbins, J. (2009). Conversion, Hierarchy, and Cultural Change: Value and Syncretism in the Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. In K.M. Rio & O.H. Smedal (Eds.). *Hierarchy: Persistence and Transformation in Social Formations* (65-88). Berghahn Books.
- Robbins, J. (2017). Can there be Conversion without Cultural Change? *Mission Studies*, 34, 29-52.
- Robinson, R. & Clarke, S. (2003). Introduction: The Many Meanings of Religious Conversion on the Indian Subcontinent. In R. Robinson and S. Clarke (Eds.). *Religious Conversion in India: Modes, Motivations, and Meanings* (1-21). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Robinson, R. (2003). *Christians of India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Robinson, R. (2010). Christian Communities of India: A Social and Historical Overview, *Religions and Development, India. Working Paper Series*, Vol.1, No.1, 1-29.
- Robinson, R. & Kajur, J. M. (Eds.). (2010). *Margins of Faith: Dalit and Tribal Christianity in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

- Sanal Mohan, P. (2015). *Modernity of slavery: struggles against caste inequality in colonial Kerala*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Sanal Mohan, P. (2019). Subaltern Counterpublics: Dalits and Missionary Christianity in Kerala. *Nidan*, Vol. 4, No.2, 97-118. doi.org/10.36886/nidan.2019.4.2.6
- Sarang, S & Mahajan, V. (Eds.). (2018). *Culturally Correct*. Mumbai: Granthali.
- Silva, K, T. (2017). Buddhism, Social Justice, and Caste: Reflection on Buddhist Engagement with Caste in India and Sri Lanka. *Society and Culture in South Asia*, 3(2), 1-13.
- Srinivas, M.N. (1956). A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization. *Far Eastern Quarterly*. 15. (4), 481-496.
- Srinivas, M. N. (Ed.). (1997). *Caste: Its Twentieth-Century Avatar*. Viking: Penguin Books.
- Stroud, S. R. (2017). The Rhetoric of Conversion as Emancipatory Strategy in India: Bhimrao Ambedkar, Pragmatism, and the Turn to Buddhism. *Rhetorica*, Vol. XXXV, Issue 3, 314-345.
- Tartakov, G. (2005). B. R. Ambedkar and Navayana Diksha. In R. Robinson & S. Clarke (Eds.). *Religious Conversion in India: Modes, Motivations, and Meanings* (192-215). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Thakkar, Mehul R. (2016, April 15). Rohith Vemula's brother and mother convert to Buddhism. *Deccan Chronicle*. <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-affairs/150416/rohit-vemula-s-brother-and-mother-convert-to-buddhism.html> Accessed on 20th April 2016.
- Tharamangalam, J. (1996). Caste Among Christians in India, In M.N. Srinivas, (Ed.), *Caste: Its Twentieth-Century Avatar* (263-291). Gurugram: Penguin Books.

- Thompson, K. (1982). *Emiel Durkheim*. London: Tavistock Publication.
- Thorat, S. (2002). Hindu social order and human rights of Dalits. *Combat Law*: Issue 4.
- Thorat, S. (2008). Social Exclusion in the Indian Context: Theoretical Basis of Inclusive Policies. *Indian Journal of Human Development*, Vol.2. No.1, 165-181.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0973703020080108>
- Van der Veer, P. (Ed.). (1996). *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity*. New York: Routledge.
- Verma, V. (2010). Reinterpreting Buddhism: Ambedkar on Politics of Social Action. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 45, No. 49, 56-65.
- Viswanath, R. (2013). The Emergence of Authenticity Talk and the Giving of Accounts: Conversion as Movement of the Soul in South India, ca 1900. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 55 (1), 120-141.
- Viswanathan, G. (1998). *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Waghmore, S. (2013). *Civility Against Caste: Dalit Politics and Citizenship in Western India*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Waghmore, S. (2019). Community, not Humanity: Caste Associations and Hindu Cosmopolitanism in Contemporary Mumbai. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*. Vol. 42, Issue 2, 375-393. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2019.1577944>

- Weber, M. (1948). *From Max Weber: Essay in Sociology*. (Hans, H. & Wright M. C., trans. & Eds.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Webster, J.C.B. (2002). *Religion and Dalit liberation*. New Delhi: Manohar Publication.
- Weiner, Robert, and Murray. (2003:1075). *Oxford Learners Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wilkinson, M. (2020). *Melbourne Asia Review*, Edition 4, November 2020. Book Review *Godroads: Modalities of conversion in India*. Editors-P. Berger and S. Sahoo (2020).
- Yengde, S. & Teltumbde, A. (Eds.). (2018). *The Radical in Ambedkar: Critical Reflections*. Gurgaon: Penguin Random House.
- Zelliot, E. (1992). *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*. New Delhi: Manohar Publication.
- Zelliot, E. (2004). B R Ambedkar and the search for a meaningful Buddhism. In Jondhale, S, and Beltz, J (Eds.), *Reconstructing the world: B R Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Zelliot, E. (2005). *Ambedkar's conversion*. New Delhi: Critical Quest.

APPENDIX

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. Basic Information:

Respondent No:

Name:

Present Address:

Urban/Rural:

Age:

Sex:

Native Place:

Taluka:

District:

2. Social Background:

Did you convert to Buddhism? Yes/No or (Practicing Buddhist without Conversion)

When have you converted?

Through which religious Institute?

The religion of Origin:

Caste of Origin:

Social Category: (1=SC, 2=ST, 3=OBC, 4=General)

Sub Caste: _____

3. Economic Status:

Type of Ration Card: 1=White; 2=Pink; 3=Yellow; 4=Antyodaya; 5 = No card

Type of House: 1 = Pucca; 2 = Semi pucca; 3 = Kutcha

Ownership of House: 1= Own; 2=Rental; 3=Govt. Quarters; 4=Sharing

Land ownership status: Yes/No

How many acres?

Major Occupation of the household: 1=Agriculture; 2=Agri Labour; 3=Govt. Job; 4=Pvt. Job;

5=Self-employed; 6= Labour work

Do you migrate to other places for work? Yes/No

Annual Income from all sources:

4. Educational Background:

Check List for Interview

The Beginning:

1. Tell us about yourself.
2. What do you think about conversion? Have you converted to Buddhism?
3. When was the first time you thought about converting to Buddhism?
4. Do you remember any event or incident that triggered you to take that decision?
5. Why conversion and no other means? What is your motivation behind deciding on conversion?
6. Why did you choose Buddhism? Any specific reason?

Historical relevance:

1. Was there anyone from your family aware of Ambedkar's conversion?
2. What was their take on Ambedkar and his conversion movement?
3. Why did your family/ community stay away from conversion for so long?
4. What were the reasons for not converting to Buddhism along with Ambedkar?
5. How difficult is it to make people aware of the exploitation they face by remaining in the Hindu religion as a caste group?
6. Why do people remain in the Hindu fold even after facing discrimination?
7. What was it to be of that particular caste? (Your caste of Origin)

8. What makes one distinguish from another caste?

Conversion Process and Role of Buddhist Religious Institutions:

1. When did you get converted? Date/Year?
2. Did you voluntarily do it, or has someone suggested it to you?
3. Conversion to Buddhism is a conscious decision; tell us about the entire process.
4. Who has given you Deeksha?
5. Is there any specific ritual of conversion? If yes, what is it?
6. Is there any specific requirement to be fulfilled by an individual before conversion? Any ritual/ reading?
7. Was any role played by Buddhist Institute/Organization in the conversion process?
8. If yes, which Institute? Tell us about it. How is it working?
9. Who has selected that particular organization?
10. What is the role of Buddhist Institutions/organizations/Buddha vihar in shaping the normative religious life of newly converts post-conversion?
11. What kind of support do you receive from Buddhist religious Institutions in your daily life?
12. What is the role of Bhante and Bauddhacharya in the religious life of the newly converted?

Post Conversion Life:

1. What has changed for you at a personal level post-conversion?
2. How do you practice Buddhism in your day-to-day life?
3. Is there any specific guideline for living life as a Buddhist post-conversion?
4. How do you avoid caste references and practices in your day-to-day life?

5. Is there any social pressure on you to continue your old religious practices and duties even after conversion?
6. What is your family's reaction to your decision to convert to Buddhism?
7. How is your community reacting to your conversion to Buddhism?
8. How do you spiritually connect with new religion?
9. Do you go on pilgrimage to Buddhist sites and historic places? If yes, what are the places you visit?
10. Can you recount some significant moments you have come across, maybe in your personal life, that you cannot forget?
11. Is there any psychological distress caused by not following old religion and religious duties?
12. How do other people react to your religious practices and asserting a new identity?
13. Do you ever feel targeted at any point during or after conversion by caste Hindus for your decision to renounce Hinduism and adopt Buddhism?
14. If yes, what may be the reasons?
15. What role does Buddhism play in contesting caste in your day-to-day life?
16. What is your caste and religion status in your legal documents?
17. Did you find it challenging to change legal documents post-conversion?

Maintaining New Religious Identity:

1. Is it challenging to maintain a distinct identity as a Buddhist from your previous caste identity?
2. Does your religion and caste of Origin create any obstacle in maintaining your new religious identity exclusively?

3. What are the different ways of asserting a separate identity of religion?
4. Do you use different symbols to assert your religious identity? What are those symbols?
5. Do you follow any ideal way of living prescribed by Buddhism?
6. Do you think the ideal behavior prescribed is different from other religions?
7. What unique life cycle rituals and ceremonies have you adopted that differ from your previous practices as a caste Hindu?
8. Do you maintain marriage preferences within your own community? Do you prefer the same caste of Origin for marriage?
9. Do you find it challenging to get a marriage partner without any caste and religion references?
10. Do you follow any unique naming pattern to maintain a separate religious identity?
11. Is there any connection between your residential location and caste identity- in urban areas, colonies, apartments, or slums?

Contesting Graded Inequality and Caste Hierarchy:

1. How was the relationship between your caste and those of other castes before?
2. Were there any conflicts between these castes?
3. What was the hierarchical and ritualistic relationship with other castes in villages and even in the city?
4. Has that changed over time after conversion to Buddhism? If yes/no, how/why?
5. Did you feel the community bonding between Buddhist converts from different castes?
6. Does this conversion bring any structural change in the society you live in? If yes/no, how/why?
7. How do you mingle with others on unique festivals and remembrance days?

8. What is the role of Mahar converts in reaching out to the masses to establish a casteless society?
9. Has the conversion to Buddhism helped to break the barriers of caste, caste hierarchy, and caste hegemony?
10. Does the Mahar caste previously converted to Buddhism still practice caste in their day-to-day life?
11. How do you address the issue of sharing space as Buddhists in villages or even cities?
12. Space and place marked for particular caste for cremation and funerals?
13. Place of living of a particular caste in villages, does that have any impact on Buddhist community bonding?
14. Conversion to Buddhism aimed at the annihilation of caste. Has that been achieved among Buddhist converts from different social backgrounds?

Women in Buddhism:

1. Did you face oppression in Hinduism?
2. If yes, what kind of oppression you faced?
3. Were you oppressed through ritualistic morality imposed on you, through gender-specific traditions and limitations?
4. How do women contest these issues in Buddhism?
5. What has changed for women after conversion?
6. Has your life world changed from what it was like as a Hindu woman after conversion to Buddhism? If yes/no, how/why?
7. How do women counter caste-imposed practices and traditions through Buddhism?
8. How do women reject symbolic oppression through Buddhism?

29 October, 2019

Certificate

This letter confirms that **Ghadage Tushar Madhukar**, Ph.D. candidate at the University of Hyderabad, participated and presented paper on “**Ambedkarites in Making: The Process of Awakening and Conversion to Buddhism among Non-Mahar Communities in Maharashtra**” in the Fifth International Conference on the Unfinished Legacy of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, hosted at The New School in New York City, USA, October 24-26, 2019.

The New School is pleased to have received and to recognize the aforementioned submission as a significant contribution to the growing discourse on caste-based discrimination inspired by Dr. Ambedkar. We are confident that Ghadage Tushar Madhukar’s work is a meaningful addition to fuel the debate concerning the interaction between gender, religion, and Dalit dignity.

This conference was made possible through an effortful collaboration between Brandeis University, Barnard College, Columbia University, UMass Amherst, The Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, Samata Foundation, University of Cincinnati, The International Ambedkar Mission, the Boston Study Group, Julien Studley Graduate Programs in International Affairs and Global Studies, and The New School.



Ashok K. Gurung
Senior Director, India China Institute
Professor of Practice, Julien J. Studley Graduate Program in International Affairs



國立清華大學

NATIONAL TSING HUA UNIVERSITY

Institute of Anthropology
National Tsing Hua University
Hsinchu 300, Taiwan, R.O.C.
TEL : 886-3-5720049
FAX : 886-3-5722800
E-mail : ioant@my.nthu.edu.tw

12 Dec. 2022

This letter confirms that Ghadage Tushar Madhukar, Ph.D. candidate at the University of Hyderabad, participated and presented a paper on "Caste, Religion, and Conversion: Dalits Contestation Against Caste in an Indian Village" in CWAIP Graduate Research Workshop on 15th June 2018.

Center for World Austronesia and Indigenous Peoples (CWAIP) is devoted to research and teaching on World Austronesia and Indigenous Peoples in Taiwan and beyond and we are pleased to have Ghadage Tushar Madhukar, a visiting fellow at Cultural Center at National Chiao Tung University to present the case study from India. This is also the first submission on Caste study which add to the scope and breadth of the workshop.

CWAIP organizes graduate research workshop annually and the effort is supported by the College for wider knowledge sharing.

Kun-hui Ku

Founding Convener of CWAIP



Ambedkarites in Making: The Process of Awakening and Conversion to Buddhism among Non-Mahar Communities in Maharashtra

Tushar Ghadage¹

Abstract

Scholars have presented Buddhist discourse in Maharashtra- the western part of India, as an expression of protest and emancipation of the former untouchable caste Mahar. But in the recent past, people from different social backgrounds belonging to non-Mahar castes have embraced Buddhism. Now it has become the collective discourse of protest of different castes and tribes from marginalized communities. This paper, an outcome of my anthropological study, concerns with changing consciousness among non-Mahar castes regarding conversion to Buddhism as a tool of resistance to overcome caste inequalities. Brahmanical patriarchy is the basis on which the caste system thrives, thus it is the root of women's oppression. Women's assertion for a gender-equal society and its actual implementation on the ground constitutes a major part of the anti-caste movement. Therefore, this study also seeks the answer to the question of how Buddhism helps to rupture the caste patriarchy and its rigid structure. A significant indicator would be to see precisely how women are breaking those age-old boundaries of castes. Therefore, this paper also addresses the issue of women's emancipation through Buddhism and how it challenges the Brahmanical patriarchy and liberates its women followers from oppression.

Keywords

Caste, religion, conversion, Buddhism, Non-mahars, Matang, women emancipation

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, Centre for the Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy, University of Hyderabad, Gachibowli, Hyderabad, Telangana-500046, India
E-mail: tushar.tiss@gmail.com

Introduction

Caste has been studied as the central organizing principle that categorizes Indian society (Rao, 2013; Dirks, 2010). Caste system is often conceptualized as a hierarchical social system that is graded, fixed, and permanent without any possibilities of change or mobility of castes, with an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt (Ambedkar, 2013). Therefore, people belonging to the so-called lower castes face the highest scale of contempt at the hands of the so-called upper castes. People from these low castes were regarded as 'impure and polluting' and thus, considered 'untouchables'. It has been also observed that such people who are assigned a low social status in the caste hierarchy and treated unequally within the Hindu-fold are attracted to religions that advocate social equality at least theoretically (Bandyopadhyay, 2004; Jeurgensmeyer, 2009).

Religions such as Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism emerged in India countering the social inequalities and discrimination prevalent in Hindu society. Religions with foreign origins such as Christianity and Islam also attracted several low caste people to escape caste discrimination (Sanal Mohan, 2015; Roberts, 2016). Thus, by providing an alternative religious philosophy, they emphasized on social equality. Dr. Ambedkar appealed to his followers to renounce Hinduism and convert to the religion that would give them dignity and equality. Nearly about one million people followed his path and converted to Buddhism. Those who converted to Buddhism majorly belonged to the Mahar¹ caste (Beltz, 2004). But in the recent past, people belonging to non-Mahar castes have also converted to Buddhism.

Though Mahar is the predominant scheduled caste (SC)² that converted to Buddhism earlier, people from non-Mahar scheduled castes such as Matang³ and some of the nomadic tribes⁴ and Other Backward Castes (OBC)⁵ in Maharashtra have also converted to Buddhism recently. Historically, the relationship between different castes has always been that of domination, subordination, and hostility. For many years, Buddhism in Maharashtra was equated with Mahars with terms like Mahar Buddhists being used for referring to new Buddhist converts; and Matang Buddhists to denote Buddhists converts from the Matang community. This exposes the feeling of 'us' and 'them' amongst Buddhist converts from different castes (Paik, 2011). Therefore, there is always a fear of non-assimilation of different castes into Buddhism in Maharashtra as merely casting off their Hindu religion does not give them the feeling of equality, especially when the graded inequality of caste system is deeply entrenched in the society. After all, it is not just the highest ideals but the actual living practice of a religion that is important. The highest values of equality, fraternity, and liberty should not remain merely teachings and belief systems of religion but it also should be practiced in the customs, usages, observances, rituals, and the common life of religious communities (Webster, 2002). Otherwise, it can further become an obstacle for the formation of a community of the new-Buddhists.

Existing scholarship on Buddhist conversion in Maharashtra revolves around Ambedkar's conversion movement and the subsequent conversion of people from Ambedkar's Mahar caste, the largest SC community in the state. However, not many studies have been undertaken to understand how the non-Mahar castes converted to Buddhism, and the processes involved in the constitution of their religious identity. Therefore, there is a pressing need to study the 'experience of conversion' among non-Mahar castes hailing from different social, and cultural backgrounds. This

paper seeks to address this important socio-religious movement of non-Mahar castes in Maharashtra and also explore the intersections of different caste identities and culture of an anti-caste movement that the Dalits claim to have adopted through their conversion to Buddhism.

This paper is an outcome of my Ph.D. research. The site of my inquiry is Beed district⁶ of Maharashtra, where the Buddhist conversion movement has gripped non-Mahar communities. Cities are considered as hubs of the conversion movement and studies on Buddhist conversion movement in the state have treated them as sites of inquiry. Most of these studies have paid very little attention to activities happening in small pockets of rural communities. Therefore, this research looks in detail in the rural and semi-urban areas, and focuses particularly on Beed district in the most deprived Marathwada region. Using non-participative observations, semi-structured interviews, and case studies as data collection methods, I interacted with newly converted Buddhists coming from different castes, from the rural and semi-urban background.

Why Conversion and Why Buddhism?

Thorat (2002) argues that, the reasons for continuation of the practice of untouchability, discrimination, and atrocities as well as violent reaction by higher castes are to be found in the continuing belief and faith by higher castes in the sanctity of the institution of caste and untouchability. The traditional Hindu social order continues to govern the thought process and behaviour of the large majority of Hindus. The provisions in the constitutional laws are secular and equal, but the customary rules of the caste system and the institution of untouchability are based on the principle of inequality. This results in a conflict between the constitution and the traditional customary rules, norm, and values of the caste system, particularly untouchability.

People continued to follow tradition as it provides immense privilege and serves their social, political, and economic interests. When the Dalits try to seek equal access and 'assert' their rights, it often invites the anger of higher caste people in the form of atrocities and physical violence. As has been well-established that the practice of untouchability and discrimination has stemmed from religious precepts and also has religious sanction, therefore, the change in the social order from a discriminatory caste Hindu society to an equal society must also have a religious character (Ambedkar, 2004; Juergensmeyer, 2009).

According to Dr. Ambedkar, religion is an indefinite word with no fixed meaning because religion has passed through many stages. He says religion is a human projection onto the cosmos of social values concerning life and its preservation embodied in the usages, practices, observances, rites, and rituals which are to shape the behaviour of those who make up the society (Webster, 2002). Dr. Ambedkar believed that the purpose of religion is to emphasize, universalize, and spiritualize social values and bring them to the mind of the individual who is required to recognize them in all his/her acts so that he/she may function as an approved member of society. Therefore, it is necessary to check what kind of social values a particular religion promises. Does it recognize every single person worth as human being, stands for equality, offers the benefits of liberty, and promote fraternity? These questions need to be asked not merely of the teachings and belief systems of any religion but also the customs, usages, observances, rituals, and the common life of communities owing allegiance to it.

I quote a statement of Dr. Ambedkar which he made to the Indian Franchise Committee in 1932 (Zelliot 2005, p.5)

...the system of caste and the system of untouchability form really the steel frame of Hindu society. This division cannot easily be wiped out for the simple reason that it is not based on rational, economic, or racial grounds....the chances are that untouchability will endure far longer into the future than the optimist reformer is likely to admit on account of the fact that it is based on religious dogma... The ordinary Hindu looks upon it as part of his religion and there is no doubt that in adopting towards untouchables what is deemed to be an inhuman way of behaviour, he does so more from the sense of observing his religion than from any motive of deliberate cruelty. Based on religion, the ordinary Hindu only relaxes the rules of untouchability where he cannot observe them. He never abandons them. For abandonment of untouchability to him involves a total abandonment of the basic religious tenets of Hinduism as understood by him and the mass of Hindus...

Dr. Ambedkar found Hinduism worth abandoning given its foundation rooted in discrimination. There is no sense of equality in Hinduism. Considering others as lower or higher based on one's birth into a particular caste has religious sanction in Hinduism. In many ways Dr. Ambedkar found the desired social values of equality, human dignity, and fraternity in Buddhism. To achieve equality, human dignity and fraternity one has to essentially change their religion from Hinduism to Buddhism. I will not go in details of whether to apply the concept of religion to Buddhism or not. But as Lakshmi Narasu (2004) says if the content of religion consists of God, fear of God, or the dread of unknown, or the hankering for the unseen and the unintelligible, or the feeling for the infinite, then Buddhism is not a religion. But if by religion we mean something which inspires enthusiasm and fervor, Buddhism is certainly a religion.

Therefore, religious conversion to Buddhism can be understood as a rejection of discriminatory practices inscribed and approved by the Hindu religion and inventing their practices⁷, which are more inclusive and equal. Conversion to Buddhism thus, is a matter of transcended identity that is equal. Through conversion, one sees freedom from oppression as not only liberation from old social alignments but a release from old religious ideas as well. So, conversion to Buddhism is a definite move toward equality in a caste-ridden society.

Buddhism among Non-Mahar Communities in Maharashtra

Several scholars have presented the Buddhist discourse in Maharashtra as an expression of protest and emancipation of the former untouchable caste Mahars and regarded Buddhism as a religion with a universal message of brotherhood and equality (Beltz, 2005; Zelliot, 2004; Omvedt, 2003). For a long time, non-Mahar castes in Maharashtra kept at the distance from Buddhism, which predominantly remained the religion of one caste, Mahars. However, a complex phenomenon like caste can't be fought out and abolished by individual castes. It requires a larger community base. Beltz (2004) argues that caste is too complex a social phenomenon to be abolished by a small minority fighting against the majority will.

In the recent past, the Buddhist conversion movement in Maharashtra has not been restricted to only the Mahars. People belonging to other low castes and tribes have started converting to Buddhism and have demonstrated how Jotirao Phule's

Sarvajanik Satyadharma (Public Religion of Truth) can be put into practice to achieve this unity among non-Brahmin castes oppressed by upper castes. People and organizations such as late advocate Eknath Awad through *Manavi Hakka Abhiyan* (Campaign for Human Rights), late Atmaram Chandane through Democratic Party of India, and late G.S. Dada Kamble through the *Satyashodhak Samaj Mahasangh* (SSM) worked tirelessly amongst the Matang and other marginalized communities to make them aware of their political rights, mobilize public opinion, and motivate them for conversion to Buddhism.

On October 14 2006, Awad along with thousands of his followers predominantly belonging to Matang community converted to Buddhism in a grand public conversion ceremony coinciding with the 50th anniversary of Dhammachakra Pravartan Din⁸ at Deeksha Bhoomi,⁹ Nagpur. Similarly, Dada Kamble, under the banner of Satyashodhak Samaj Mahasangha, organized more than ten *Deeksha* (initiation) ceremonies at different locations wherein hundreds of Matang community people converted to Buddhism.

Other economically and socially backward and isolated groups in the state comprising nomadic and de-notified tribes are also reclaiming their histories, linking their ritualistic practices to Buddhist traditions. They too are claiming Buddhism as their past. There are community leaders like Laxman Mane who are working on the agenda of reaching out to these groups and awakening them to anti-caste ideology. Like Awad, Mane too, along with a few of his colleagues converted to Buddhism on October 14, 2006, and seven months later May 27, 2007 he organized a grand public event for his followers from de-notified tribes who converted to Buddhism in Mumbai.

The non-Aryan theory regarding Aryans as foreign invaders and the non-Brahmin (lower castes) as original inhabitants as proposed by Phule was de-emphasized by Hindu nationalist forces. As a result, people belonging to middle (OBC) castes preferred to align themselves with Brahmin castes. The non-Aryan concept was restricted within untouchables and tribal communities. But in recent times OBCs in Maharashtra in general, and Beed district in particular, are trying to re-establish unity among non-Brahmin castes by claiming their ethnic and cultural past by highlighting differences of traditions been followed by Hindu upper-caste and low castes historically. The *Satyashodhak OBC Parishad*, a leading OBC movement founded by late Hanumant Upare and now led by his son Sandeep Upare, has played an important role in bringing OBCs into the fold of Buddhism. The organization re-emphasized the belief that OBCs are natives of this land and were Buddhist in the past. Therefore, conversion to Buddhism for them is reclamation of their past religion.

Hanumant Upare, however, passed on March 19, 2015 before his announced conversion date of October 14, 2016. Due to the death of Hanumant Upare, Satyashodhak OBC Parishad couldn't organize the conversion ceremony on the proposed date. Later, under the leadership of Sandeep Upare, the organization organized a Deeksha ceremony, in which Upare's entire family took to Buddhism along with their followers from the OBC community.

The Process of Politicization and Actual Conversion

After a visit to Burma (Now Myanmar) and Sri Lanka, the lack of social concerns among *Bhikkus* (monks) there made Dr. Ambedkar think about an active *Sangha* (community) which would work like an 'activist missionary' (Zelliot, 2004). Dr.

Ambedkar imagined the Buddhist monk as a social worker who works for the benefits of society unlike a priest in Hinduism. But contrary to what Dr. Ambedkar had envisioned the Buddhist monks did not go into the community to spread Buddhism. They have not reached to the places where majority Buddhists are residing. It is evident from the fact that many of the newly Buddhist converts in the villages have never seen any monks or *Bhikkus* reaching out to them to teach them the principles of Buddhism. Therefore, village level community leaders and social activists have taken the responsibility of 'activist missionary' and have involved themselves in the process of reaching out to householders/ lay Buddhists and preach Buddha's eightfold path.

The process of conversion to Buddhism is conscious. It is regarded as a *politicization process* through which people who stayed away from Buddhism for a long time are awakened. Activists employ different approaches to initiate interaction with *non-politicized* communities to introduce anti-caste ideology. It is an activity in which fellow community members are informed that caste is the root cause of their problems and since caste is an integral part of Hinduism, the solution to these problems lies in conversion from Hinduism. It is also believed that Buddhism will help in improving the social condition of its followers and emancipate them.

This process of politicization is complex in the way various tactics are used in pursuit of bringing people into the fold. As told by Dr. Ambedkar (2003, W&S Vol 17. Part I) in his speech delivered at the Bombay Presidency Mahar Conference, 'to materialize the goal of conversion it is very important to judge the public opinion of all the communities.' Dr. Ambedkar believed that public opinion judged through the meetings of each caste separately is more representative and reliable than the opinion arrived at through a common meeting of all the castes together. Carrying forward this legacy of Dr. Ambedkar, continuous efforts have been made to mobilize public opinion of conversion among marginalized castes. It is done through propagating anti-caste ideologies of social reformers, primarily belonging to the same castes in which politicization is progressing. For example, among Matang community anti-caste ideas of Annabhau Sathe, Lahuji Salve, and Mukta Salve who hail from the same community have been propagated. Similarly, among Charmakars, it has been done by propagating the anti-caste ideas of Sant Ravidas. Among OBCs it has been done by invoking Jotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule,¹⁰ and their anti-caste discourse of *Sarva janik Satyadharma* and *Satyashodhak Samaj* (the truth seekers society). Thereafter highlighting linkages with anti-caste ideologies of different social reformers and with Ambedkarism they try to establish a common platform for the introduction of Buddhism.

To become a Buddhist also means one must follow the Buddha's teaching. Following the eightfold path given by Gautam Buddha is the basic expectation from Buddhists. Omvedt (2003) summarized the eightfold path of Buddha and divided it into three major sections- (i) rules for living or righteous conduct, (ii) meditation, and (iii) intellectual insights. Although a householder or lay Buddhist is considered to be capable of observing all these precepts, the major emphasis is on righteous conduct. Therefore, social activists who work in the community to spread Buddhism also emphasize upon the righteous conduct of the eightfold path in their interactions.

Social platforms such as celebrating *Jayantis* (birth anniversaries) of eminent personalities such as Dr. Ambedkar, Mahatma Phule, Savitribai Phule, Anna Bhau

Sathe, Chatrapati Shahu Maharaj, among others who have inspired generations are used by social activists to spread awareness and enlighten people about the anti-caste ideology and the Buddha's teachings. It is also coupled with grand public celebrations of significant events of the anti-caste movement and Dalit resistance such as the *Mahad Satyagraha*¹¹, *Manusmriti Dahan Din*,¹² *Dhammachakra Pravartan Din*, etc. Through these events activists reach out to masses in a bid to educate them about the forgotten histories of their ancestors.

Even though the decision on religious conversion is a personal choice and the decision is taken in individual capacity, the actual conversion ritual is done in a grand public ceremony along with other individuals who wish to convert. Such a public display of religious conversion and assertion of their right to choose their religion is considered essential not only to counter the dominant Hindu culture but also encourage others to come forward and assert their religious views openly and convert.

Reinterpreting Sarvajanic Satya Dharma and Buddhist Conversion among Non-Mahars

It is imperative to mention Mahatma Phule's 'non-Aryan theory' here. According to this theory, all lower castes can be considered a community of the oppressed for they are exploited by upper castes in a caste society (Omvedt, 1971). Phule considered all non-Brahmin castes as oppressed communities. It is nothing but the class of oppressed castes against the class of oppressor castes. However, Dr. Ambedkar had cautioned that, it's very difficult to ally with the oppressed castes as there is graded inequality among them. That proved true as most of the middle castes aligned with upper castes and separated themselves from the then untouchable low castes. There was a pressing need for a well-organized and coordinated effort to bring these oppressed castes together and form an alliance to fight caste slavery. Buddhism seems to be playing an important role in this direction as it is offering an alternative platform for this mobilization.

The activist missionary put Phule's theory of exploitation into practice to mobilize non-Brahmin castes together. As per Phule (Cited in Omvedt, 1971), Brahmins were the exploiters whose dominant position in the caste system and religiously justified monopoly over resources and knowledge enabled them to generate enormous power. Brahmins were seen as descendants of Aryan invaders, therefore an outsider, who had divided the indigenous population through the caste system. Though Phule focused on cultural and ethnic factors and not on economic and political factors as a reason for exploitation, the activist missionary (Buddhist activists) linked cultural and ethnic factors to the economic and political problems of non-Brahmin communities. Some highlighted the exclusion of oppressed communities from the development activities of the state, while some others dwelt on the persistent caste-based violence and atrocities they face; and for some of them it is about their experience of being denied citizenship rights and other basic human rights. The conscious efforts of these activist missionaries in mobilization and politicization of communities led them to take a common path that is Buddhism. Therefore, Buddhism has now become the collective discourse of protest against caste oppression for the people coming from different

social backgrounds. It offers a collective religious identity and has the potential to challenge caste from its roots.

The real challenge for newly converted Buddhists, however, comes after crossing the hurdle of the conversion ritual. Merely converting to Buddhism does not give them equal status, especially when caste is a system of graded inequality. Dr. Ambedkar has given certain guidelines to overcome this problem and those who convert to Buddhism are expected to follow the guidelines. One of the basic and essential expectations from the new converts is to reject Hinduism and its traditions. The second expectation is to follow Buddhist principles and lead life adhering to Buddhist values. Buddhists believe that they do not have caste. It is expected to assert their identity as Buddhists without any sense of hierarchy. Newly converted Buddhists believe in equality and humanity as their social ideas. Rationalism and atheism become the basis for Buddhist lifestyle and morality holds the place of God in Buddhism (Zelliot, 2004). But these teachings and belief systems of Buddhism also need to be tested on the customs, usages, observances, rituals, and the common life of religious communities in their everyday life. After all, it is not just the highest ideals but the actual living practice of religion that is important (Webster, 2002).

Women Assertion: Confronting Caste to Reconstruct Society

The liberation of women from all kinds of oppression was the focal point of anti-caste movement led by Mahatma Phule and Savitribai Phule. They believed that gender-equal society and liberation of women from oppressive caste patriarchy is the founding stage of the annihilation of the caste system. Therefore, the best way to understand whether Buddhism is helping communities to overcome caste or not is to observe how the newly converted communities deal with their women, as they are always used as a tool to control boundaries of caste in Hinduism. Women are degraded, exploited, and treated inhumanly in a caste-ridden society. Brahmanical patriarchy is rooted in the caste system and hence the root cause of women's oppression. They face discrimination in the name of rituals, customs, traditions, etc. Women are subjected to patriarchy at various levels. They face many restrictions and control over their choices even in everyday activities resulting in exclusion of women from various walks of daily life. Dalit women are doubly oppressed, first as women they are considered as the second gender in a male-dominated society and secondly, as women from oppressed castes (Paik, 2011).

With the revival of Buddhism in Maharashtra women from the converted families have found themselves caught between two conflicting ideologies: on one side the Buddhist philosophy offers liberation to all its members from all sorts of oppression and inequalities and on the other is the deep-rooted tradition of patriarchal practices of casteist Hindu society. Therefore, it is important to see how Buddhist women are challenging those boundaries of castes because it's women's assertion and its actual implementation on the ground which poses a major threat to the caste society. It also constitutes a major part of the anti-caste Buddhist ideology.

I present here the life stories of two common women who fought their way out of caste patriarchy and adopted Buddhism and set a role model for others to follow. With their resilient fight, they showed that Buddhism offers freedom and liberation to every individual.

Madhu (name changed) who hailed from the Matang caste before her conversion had to rebel against her parents, who still believe in Hinduism. According to tradition, she was denied higher education and forced her into marriage at an early age. Against her parents' wishes, she completed her Bachelor's degree in Nursing and started working in one of the Government Medical Colleges in Maharashtra. Notwithstanding an envious government job, Madhu's life after marriage was no different from what it was at her parents'. She was routinely subjected to domestic violence for not bearing a child. Her husband, in-laws, and parents were forcing her to permit the second marriage of her husband without divorcing him. She proposed the adoption of a child as a solution. But they neither agreed to adoption nor to divorce as she had a government job which means stable income. Thus, their decision came from interest in her earnings and not from their affection for her as an individual. Finally, Madhu obtained a divorce from her husband through the legal procedure and has adopted a daughter as a single mother.

Madhu gives credit to Dr. Ambedkar for whatever she has achieved in life. She holds caste patriarchy responsible for the torture she had undergone and does not accept it as her 'fate' as expected of Hindu women. She believes it is Dr. Ambedkar and his constitution that gave her the right to live with dignity. But caste patriarchy keeps governing the thought processes of individuals and justifies such discriminatory behaviour. It is this system of caste patriarchy that made her parents treat their children of different genders unequally. Therefore, she decided to convert to Buddhism as she believes that Buddha's Dhamma has everything she requires to lead a dignified life.

Life after conversion hasn't been easy for Madhu. Her parents were already unhappy with her over her divorce decision. In addition to this, Madhu converted to Buddhism and adopted a daughter further aggravating the situation as her parents ostracized her and severed all familial relationships with her. One needs to understand the hardship Madhu has undergone at the hands of her family and her decision to convert to Buddhism from the historical context. There was a sense of internalization and acceptance among ex-untouchable castes of their 'outcaste' status in the caste hierarchy (Fitzgerald, 1997). As mentioned earlier, most of the Buddhists in Maharashtra, though not all, belong to one single caste that is Mahar. For long, the Matangs remained distant from the conversion movement. Conversion to Buddhism was considered an act of defiance of the caste norms by the Matang community, which ostracized members who embraced Buddhism. Although Mahars faced the brunt of upper castes for breaking the caste norms and daring to convert to Buddhism, they never faced any internal opposition from their caste and blood relatives as it was a collective act of conversion of the majority of their fellow caste people. The same is not the case with Matangs as about the community is pretty much divided over the issue of conversion.

Defying all these oppressive structures Madhu, a divorcee with no child of her own (considered taboo), has adopted a girl child post-divorce, and converted to Buddhism. She is leading her life as an empowered individual having broken all the oppressive caste and patriarchal boundaries. *Satyashodhak Samaj Mahasangh*, the social movement started by Dada Kamble, has played a crucial role in Madhu's journey from being an oppressed Hindu woman to a self-reliant Buddhist activist. SSM works amongst the marginalized communities politicizing them about the anti-caste discourse, awakening them to the legacy of their Buddhist past and its philosophy, and finally, motivating them to convert into Buddhism. Madhu is volunteering as the District Coordinator of SSM Women Wing of one of the districts. As Dr. Ambedkar responded to questions raised against conversion and possible isolation of untouchable castes after conversion, he said the only way to end social isolation is to establish kinship with, and get themselves incorporated into another community which is free from the spirit of caste (Ambedkar, 2016). Madhu found new friends and family in SSM as she has continued to spend time in the organization and work towards spreading Buddhism among the marginalized communities.

Durkheim's (1995) definition of religion emphasizes more on the importance of religious beliefs and practices, which are *sacred*. This sacred gets its meaning in connection with forbidden. Sacredness is maintained by protecting and prohibited from something which is not considered as sacred. Similarly, women's body is used by Hinduism to maintain sacredness by imposing many restrictions on women. Women were made to carry the burden of maintaining the purity of religious rituals in Hinduism. The natural capacities of menstruation and reproduction were always considered impure. Menstruating women were kept away from the day to day life and treated as untouchable by their family members. They were restricted from taking part in auspicious religious rituals. Even in the present times though it is a rule of the constitution which is governing every individual in independent India, women continue to be oppressed in the name of religious traditions and culture.

Childless women, widows, and divorcees are seldom treated with grace by orthodox believers of the religion. Women have always been treated as second class citizens irrespective of their caste locations when it comes to religious rituals. The castes and persons involved in ritualistic affairs and priesthood are regarded as the highest and purest in the caste hierarchical society that is dominated by men. Women have not been allowed to conduct any rituals in Hinduism but although their bodies are used as tools to maintain the sacredness of rituals. Therefore, disassociating the self from the gender roles prescribed by Hindu scriptures is the first step towards liberation from a caste-patriarchal society. Madhu is the quintessence of liberation in this regard. She not only defied the gender roles but also challenged the caste boundaries with her assertion of human dignity through religious conversion.

At one point in time in the early stage of Buddhist revival in Maharashtra, all rituals in Buddhism were dominated by males- Bhante¹³. Bhante are also known as Baudh Bhikku or Baudhacharya in Maharashtra. But during my fieldwork in Beed district, I have witnessed Buddhist weddings in which the ceremonial part was conducted by a female *Baudhacharya*, Ms. Manisha, the second protagonist of my

paper. She is a social activist from Beed, and has performed many Buddhists as well as *Satyashodhak* weddings. Fondly called *Tai* (elder sister), Ms Manisha hails from an OBC community. Her husband is also a Buddhist, who had converted to Buddhism along with their leader Eknath Avad in the mass conversion event organized by Manvi Hakka Abhiyan at Dikshabhoomi, Nagpur in 2006.

Manisha Tai represents the kind of activist missionary as envisioned by Dr. Ambedkar: She is a fulltime social activist having dedicated her life for the cause of women's emancipation. By performing such religious rituals, Tai has challenged the gender roles in the religious domain. She and her husband Mr. Ashok- also a full-time social activist, are instrumental in encouraging, arranging, and performing many inter-caste/religious marriages. They not only encourage and help in solemnizing inter-caste marriages but also work to ensure the safety of the newly married couples after marriages as many a time the families do not accept such alliances, especially when one of the spouses is from a lower caste.

Manisha Tai considers herself as a lay woman, who is not highly educated but her self-study about Buddha's teachings and her experience of working as a social activist at grassroots level has strengthened her belief that both men and women are equal and are equally capable of changing their life-world and that gives her the strength to stand for what is right. Manisha Tai says, '*conversion to Buddhism means you consider everyone equal. But it's not true for everyone. Even among Ambedkarite Buddhists, their women are not treated equally. Many of the men even after conversion were not aware of their subtle patriarchy in their day to day life. We have to make them aware of it.*' This shows the reflexive nature of anti-caste ideology that Buddhism has imparted amongst its followers.

Manisha Tai didn't stop at highlighting her key learnings from Buddhist philosophy; she implemented those learnings in her anti-caste activism through her association with social movements. She was the President of *Savitribai Phule Mahila Mandal* (SPMM). SPMM is one of the initiatives of Manavi Hakka Abhiyan. Creating awareness about gender equality among men and women is one of the most important activities undertaken by SPMM. It has organized multiple workshops for men and women on gender equality and developing leadership qualities among women. 'Unless we achieve gender equality in all spheres of life, we can't say that we have become Buddhists in a true sense', she says.

Dr. Ambedkar (2016, W&S Vol.5) believed that 'the purpose of religion is not to explain the origin of the world.... An ideal religion is one that transforms society into a moral, ideal, and democratic order, such as Buddhism.' This methodology of Dr. Ambedkar clubbing Buddhist values with political activism to bring social change reflects in the kind of work these women social activists are presently engaged in. As social activists, they are using Buddhist values in their day to day activities in challenging Brahmanical patriarchal structure by rejecting gender roles and showing compassion in their approach while addressing women's issues irrespective of caste and class.

Conclusion

Through this paper, I have tried to demonstrate that Buddhism now is not restricted to one particular Dalit caste but has become a collective form of protest for people belonging to various marginalized identities in Maharashtra. People from different social backgrounds are taking to the Buddhist way of life to assert their disapproval of the discriminatory practices of the Hindu religion. In the process, women have taken the lead and they are rejecting the dominant perception and popular notion that women are second class citizens and are always supposed to be subordinate to men. The converted Buddhist women have rejected the gender roles prescribed by the Brahmanical patriarchal caste structure and stand against any form of oppression. By converting from Hinduism, they are not washing their hands of their responsibilities, rather they draw power from the Buddhist philosophy to change their life-world. Buddhist women are at the forefront in reshaping and reconstructing their social, political, cultural, and biological conditions. As it is rightly pointed out by Omvedt (1971), what Phule seems to have sensed accurately that as long as there was inequality in the family, there could be no true equality in the society. Suppression of women, in traditional Hindu culture, went hand in hand with the suppression of low castes and untouchables. Against this backdrop, Buddhism plays an important role as it provides an alternative world view different from the oppressive caste society of Hinduism which leads to the self-transformation of Buddhist women resulting in the transformation of the society, they live in.

References

- Ambedkar, B.R. (2003). *Writings and speeches, Vol. 17 (Part-1)*. Mumbai: Government of Maharashtra, Education Department.
- Ambedkar, B.R. (2004). *Conversion as emancipation*. New Delhi: Critical Quest.
- Ambedkar, B.R. (2013). *Castes in India: their mechanism, genesis, and development*. New Delhi: Critical Quest.
- Ambedkar, B.R. (2016). *Writings and Speeches, Vol.5*. Mumbai: Government of Maharashtra, Education Department.
- Bandyopadhyay, S. (2004). *Caste, culture, and hegemony: social domination in colonial Bengal*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Beltz, J. (2004). Contesting caste, hierarchy, and Hinduism: Buddhist discursive practice in Maharashtra. In Jondhale, S, and Beltz, J (eds.), *Reconstructing the world: B R Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Beltz, J. (2005). *Mahar, Buddhist, and Dalit: religious conversion and socio-political emancipation*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Chakravarti, U. (2004). Is Buddhism the Answer to Brahmanical Patriarchy? In Jondhale, S, and Beltz, J (eds.), *Reconstructing the World: B R Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Dirks, N. (2010). *Caste of mind: colonialism and the making of modern India*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.
- Durkheim, E. (1995). *The elementary forms of religious life*. New York: The Free Press.
- Fitzgerald, T. (1997). Ambedkar Buddhism in Maharashtra. *Contribution to Indian Sociology (n.s.)*, 31,2, 225-251.

- Juergensmeyer, M. (2009). *Religious rebels in Punjab- The Ad Dharm challenge to caste*. New Delhi: Navayana.
- Narasu, Lakshmi P. (2004). The rationality of Buddhism. In Sharma, S. K. and Sharma, U. (Eds.), *Cultural and religious heritage of India, Volume 3: Buddhism*. New Delhi: Mittal Publications.
- Omvedt, G. (1971). Jotirao Phule and the ideology of social revolution in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 6(37), 1969-1979.
- Omvedt, G. (2003). *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and caste*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Paik, S. (2011). Mahar-Dalit-Buddhist: The history and politics of naming in Maharashtra. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 45(2), 217-241.
- Rao, A. (2013). *The caste question: Dalits and politics of modern India*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.
- Roberts, N. (2016). *To be cared for-the power of conversion and foreignness of belonging in an Indian slum*. New Delhi: Navayana.
- Sanal Mohan, P. (2015). *Modernity of slavery: struggles against caste inequality in colonial Kerala*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Thorat, S. (2002). Hindu social order and human rights of Dalits. *Combat Law: Oct-Nov 2002: Issue 4*.
- Webster, J.C.B. (2002). *Religion and Dalit liberation*. New Delhi: Manohar Publication.
- Zelliot, E. (2004). B R Ambedkar and the search for a meaningful Buddhism. In Jondhale, S, and Beltz, J (Eds.), *Reconstructing the world: B R Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Zelliot, E. (2005). *Ambedkar's conversion*. New Delhi: Critical Quest.

Endnotes

- 1 The *Mahar* caste is numerically the largest ex-untouchable caste in Maharashtra. They comprise almost six percent of the total state population and almost sixty percent of the total scheduled caste (SC) population of the state. Apart from Maharashtra, they have scattered presence in neighbouring states of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka, and Telangana.
- 2 The scheduled caste (SC) is the constitutional category assigned to castes considered 'untouchable' in Hindu scriptures and practices. These castes are officially regarded as socially disadvantaged for implementation of an affirmative action programme called reservation in India.
- 3 Matang, also known as Mang is the second-largest scheduled caste in Maharashtra. They constitute thirty percent of the total SC population in the state.
- 4 The Nomadic Tribes and De-notified Tribes are the people without fixed habitation and consist of about sixty million people in India, out of which about five million live in Maharashtra. There are 315 Nomadic Tribes and 198 De-notified Tribes in India. Because of their nomadic lifestyle and derogatory group attributes these tribes are stigmatized and socially isolated, and remain educationally and economically backward. They are among the most marginalized communities in India.
- 5 The Other Backward Class is the constitutional category of castes that are educationally and economically disadvantaged given their social status in the caste hierarchy. Primarily these are castes of artisans and peasants, who are also referred to as middle-castes.
- 6 Beed district is located in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra. Around eighty percent of its population resides in rural areas. Out of the total population of Beed district, 13.58 percent are SC and 11.81 percent are ST.

- 7 After conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism, newly converted Buddhist are not supposed to follow Hindu traditions, rituals, religious practices and also not supposed to worship god and goddess.
- 8 Dhammachakra Pravartan Din is the day when Dr. Ambedkar converted to Buddhism in Nagpur on October 14, 1956 along with an estimated one million followers. This day is also called Ashok Vijaydashmi as it was on this day that Emperor Ashoka embraced Buddhism.
- 9 Place in Nagpur, where Dr Ambedkar converted to Buddhism. Deeksha is Sanskrit for initiation.
- 10 Social reformer Jotirao Phule is also called Mahatma (great soul). Along with his wife Savitribai, Phule made significant contributions toward the upliftment of downtrodden communities in Maharashtra. They were pioneers in Dalit and Women's movements which laid the foundation of the anti-caste movement in India by giving an alternative ideology to the non-Brahmin subaltern castes of the nation.
- 11 Mahad Satyagraha also called Chavdar Tale Satyagraha was a social movement intended to resist the inhuman practices of Hindu upper castes to prevent untouchable castes from using water of a public tank. It was a non-violent civil resistance led by Dr. Ambedkar on March 20, 1927 to allow all untouchable castes to use water from a public tank in Mahad town of Raigad district. The high point of the event was the act of drinking water from the public tank by Ambedkar and his Dalit followers. The day is also observed as Social Empowerment day in India.
- 12 On December 25, 1927, Dr. Ambedkar along with his followers burned the Manusmriti as a symbol of the rejection of the discriminatory Hindu scripture which is the basis of untouchability against low castes in India. Manusmriti is the ancient Hindu law code that divides the Hindu society into castes with 'graded inequality.' It regulated the day to day activities and prescribed punishments for violators of the caste code.
- 13 Bhante is respectable title used to address Buddhist monks which confers recognition of greatness and respect in Theravada Buddhist tradition.

"Caste, Religion, and Conversion: Contestation of Caste through Buddhism among non-Mahar communities in Maharashtra. "

by Tushar Madhukar Ghadage



Librarian
Indira Gandhi Memorial Library
UNIVERSITY OF HYDERABAD
Central University P.O.
HYDERABAD-500 046.

Submission date: 28-Dec-2022 03:49PM (UTC+0530)

Submission ID: 1987077230

File name: PDF_copy_for_Final_Plagiarism_check-Tushar..pdf (3.77M)

Word count: 70689

Character count: 386487

"Caste, Religion, and Conversion: Contestation of Caste through Buddhism among non-Mahar communities in Maharashtra. "

ORIGINALITY REPORT

3%

SIMILARITY INDEX

3%

INTERNET SOURCES

1%

PUBLICATIONS

0%

STUDENT PAPERS

PRIMARY SOURCES

1

journals.library.brandeis.edu

Internet Source

1%

2

dokumen.pub

Internet Source

<1%

3

ebin.pub

Internet Source

<1%

4

dspace.uohyd.ac.in

Internet Source

<1%

5

nanopdf.com

Internet Source

<1%

6

www.shrigururavidasji.com

Internet Source

<1%

7

Joel Robbins. "Chapter 2 Conversion, Hierarchy, and Cultural Change: Value and Syncretism in the Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity", Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2022

Publication

<1%

8	Jayaseelan Raj. "Post-colonial caste, Ambedkar, and the politics of counter-narrative", History and Anthropology, 2022 Publication	<1 %
9	www.scribd.com Internet Source	<1 %
10	RONKI RAM. "Beyond Conversion and Sanskritisation: Articulating an Alternative Dalit Agenda in East Punjab", Modern Asian Studies, 2011 Publication	<1 %
11	philpapers.org Internet Source	<1 %
12	theprint.in Internet Source	<1 %
13	mafiadoc.com Internet Source	<1 %
14	Submitted to Liverpool Hope Student Paper	<1 %
15	epdf.tips Internet Source	<1 %
16	snphilosophers2005.tripod.com Internet Source	<1 %
17	www.mea.gov.in Internet Source	<1 %

18	silo.pub Internet Source	<1 %
19	works.bepress.com Internet Source	<1 %
20	ciobwcs.com Internet Source	<1 %
21	vdoc.pub Internet Source	<1 %
22	zdocs.tips Internet Source	<1 %
23	doczz.net Internet Source	<1 %
24	Submitted to University of Cambridge Student Paper	<1 %
25	sarvajan.ambedkar.org Internet Source	<1 %
26	Submitted to University of KwaZulu-Natal Student Paper	<1 %
27	surface.syr.edu Internet Source	<1 %
28	Jayashree B. Gokhale. "The Sociopolitical Effects of Ideological Change: The Buddhist Conversion of Maharashtrian Untouchables", The Journal of Asian Studies, 2011 Publication	<1 %

29	Todd M. Johnson, Brian J. Grim. "The World's Religions in Figures", Wiley, 2013 Publication	<1 %
30	qspace.library.queensu.ca Internet Source	<1 %
31	voxpopluidе.wordpress.com Internet Source	<1 %
32	Bindu Puri. "The Ambedkar–Gandhi Debate", Springer Science and Business Media LLC, 2022 Publication	<1 %
33	V. Geetha. "Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar and the Question of Socialism in India", Springer Science and Business Media LLC, 2021 Publication	<1 %
34	www.bookrix.com Internet Source	<1 %
35	www.ticijournals.org Internet Source	<1 %
36	Clark, Barry. "The Evolution of Economic Systems", Oxford University Press Publication	<1 %
37	player.fm Internet Source	<1 %
38	www.ambedkar.org Internet Source	<1 %

Exclude quotes On

Exclude bibliography On

Exclude matches < 14 words