



# **Caste-Religious Fault line in Indian Society with Reference to the Dalit- Buddhist Equations**

**Dr. Preeti Oza  
St. Andrew's College  
University of Mumbai**

- *Knowing that there was so much unhappiness in the world the Buddha realized that it was wrong for him to sit as a sanyasi [ascetic] with folded arms and allow things to remain as they were. Asceticism he found to be useless. It was vain to attempt to escape from the world.... What is necessary is to change the world and to make it better.*

(Ambedkar 1984:78)

- *All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice. The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.*

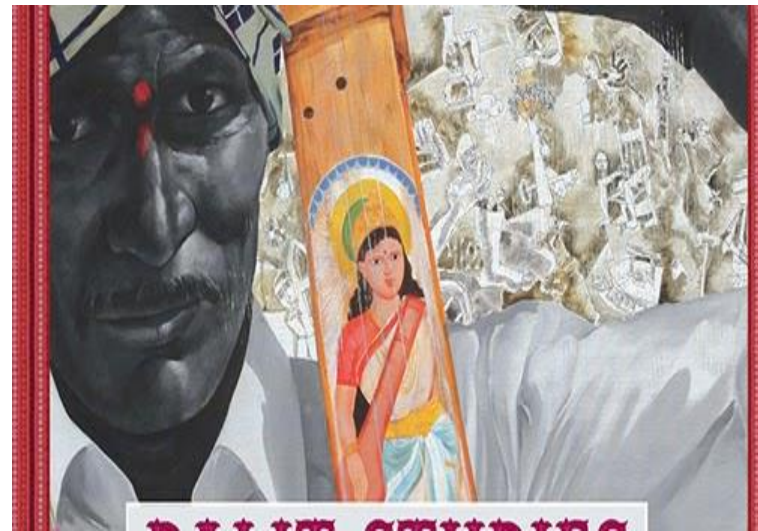
(Marx [1845] 1964:620)

# India Today...

- Some of the major religious doctrines that have persisted for about 2,500 years and during this period has undergone profound radical changes.
- The last century has seen a revitalisation and expansion of Buddhism through out south and south-east Asia.
- Its major tenets have been modernised and reformulated by many political leaders like Ambedkar (1891-1956) in India.
- While his attempt was to give an ethical foundation to the dalit movement, Buddhism emerged from this transformation imbued with nationalist associations and political aspirations that anchored it in many civil movements in India.

# Caste Conflict

- Regular phenomena in many parts of the country
- Patterns of agrarian economy
- Dalit politics movement like land reforms
- A new generation of cultural constructionists among Dalits
- Influence of Marx, Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule and Periyar
- In the 70's and 80's, the regional specificities of culture and social relations also contributed to Dalit politics



# Religion-Ideology-Politics

- Dalits have converted to Buddhism and adopted as their long-range political goal the establishment of a democratic socialist state.
- The ideology of Dalits synthesizes threads of Buddhist and Marxist philosophies.
- Longstanding debates about the supposed incompatibility of Buddhism and Marxism' pose questions regarding the conjunction of religion and politics in popular movements



# Syncretism of religion...

- *“An important aspect of cultural struggle is the syncretism of religion and politics. Contemporary cultural struggles are characterized by the tendency to theologize political conflicts, to transform domestic and international adversaries into enemies who represent the forces of evil”*

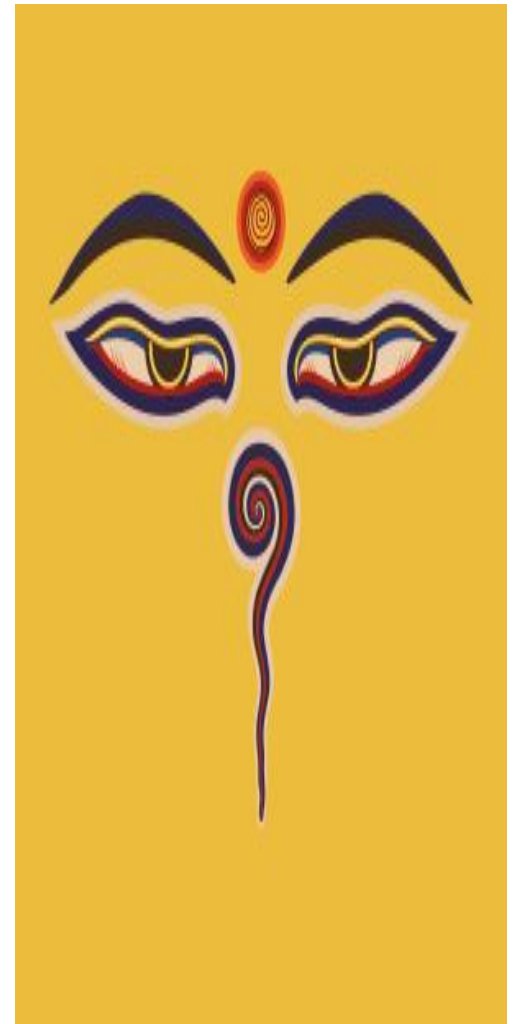
(McCarthy, in Schmitt 1985:viii).

- This syncretism of religion and politics, while causing little trauma for those actually engaged in social movements, has presented scholars with an analytic dilemma: Is religion being secularized, or is politics being sacralised.

- *'Pained' by Una episode, many Dalits plan to embrace Buddhism.*  
*Post Una incident 1,000 people from the community in Banaskantha district have so far expressed their desire to convert to Buddhism...'*
- This news in the *Indian Express* on July 27, 2016 shows the utter importance of a well thought out discussion on the topics of Culture and Identity Politics with a very specific reference to the newly revised concept of Dharma and its role in providing social security and justice.



- practices of naming, especially the recent adoption of a 'Buddhist' identity by middle-class Dalits in contemporary India
- multiple, shifting, and contested meanings of being Dalit.
- Examining the politics of this plurality shows the varied concerns at work in applying and contesting different names, especially the social and psychological challenges inherent in such acts of self-identification.
- the ambiguities and ambivalences of being Dalit and Buddhist





- Conversion is a complex and delicate issue vitiated when viewed in a communal context.
- The 'savarna' response to dalit conversion as expressed in anti-conversion laws, under the guise of protecting the dalits, traps them in a 'no entry, no exit' situation.
- discourse considers the perspective of the converter and the converted, opening up in turn issues of civil rights (including that of dalits) that must not be compromised.
- It is necessary to view conversion as a 'process' rather than an event, if one is to address the complexities involved.

# Objectives

- The major objectives of this paper are ...
- To map the spread of Buddhism in India and generate a clear picture about the different caste groups and the Buddhist communities.
- Also to consider the caste-Religious Fault line as a social phenomenon.
- To look at the role of Buddhism in the everyday life of the people and the philosophical facets and how they give meaning and identity to the lives of the people.

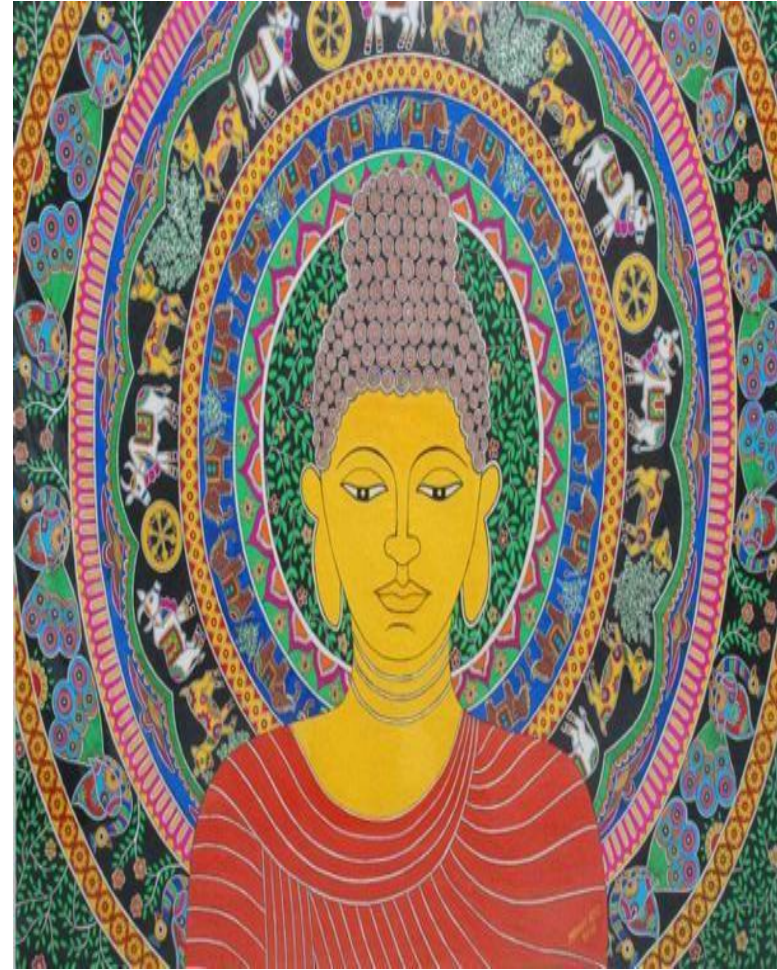
# Culture- Politics

- Like any other social movement, dalit movement/politics too, in the initial stages of its inception, created an euphoria that its politics of cultural protest would ultimately transform the social relations at different structural levels.
- Dalit politics adopted the symbolism of Ambedkar- an uncritical symbol of fighting the landed gentry, rural discrimination and for new identity formation of Dalits



# Some unresolved questions

- It could not, however, resolve the dilemmas of Dalit identity which Ambedkar had also had to face earlier:
- ***Should the term Dalit be narrowly construed to mean only the untouchables, the socially oppressed or should it include in its ambit all the exploited classes, both caste Hindus and the ex-untouchables?***
- ***The latter course would make it a natural ally of the communists. Further, should the claims to being true 'Ambedkrites' be confined to the neo Buddhists (converts to Buddhism from among the dalits) or should all the dalits-Hindus and Buddhists alike-be allowed to claim the legislation.***



# Protective discrimination

- In the two decades since the formation of the Maharashtra state, a new middle class had arisen among the Dalits, especially the neo-Buddhists, thanks to the policy of protective discrimination.
- It was the interests of this class which got more and more reflected in the concerns of the Dalit organisations in India.
- There was a proliferation of separate organisations of these dalits among students, in literature, trade unions of government servants, and so on.
- This left the rural Dalit, who still form a majority, high and dry.



# Politico-Economic Exploitation

- This combination of politico-economic forces in Maharashtra has resulted in the marginalisation of the rural poor, in particular, the landless agricultural labour.
- The scheduled castes form a sizeable segment of this sector.
- Their problems are chronic unemployment, abject poverty and economic exploitation.



# Ambedkar Effect...

- Ambedkar converted to Buddhism on October 14, 1956. He had designed his Buddhism with a holy book, a conversion ritual with 22 "Buddhist Oaths" and a dress code
- While swearing these oaths, the convert should reject Hindu deities as well as rituals and fight for an equal and just society.
- Ambedkar meant his Navayana Buddhism - as it is nowadays called to be a total rejection of Hinduism.
- To abjure Hinduism was for him the only solution to escape the caste system and establish equality



# Ambedkarite - Dalit Formula...

- 1950s and 1960s were a time of optimism, industrial expansion and intellectual fermentation.
- For the second generation of educated dalits, there were new openings in government service, education and politics through reservation.
- Many of those who had been members and supporters of the Adi Hindu Sabha first joined the Scheduled Caste Federation and became members of the Republican Party later, which was designed by Ambedkar, but only got established after his death in 1957.
- Politically, they became Ambedkarites but socially they still follow the Adi Hindu notions.

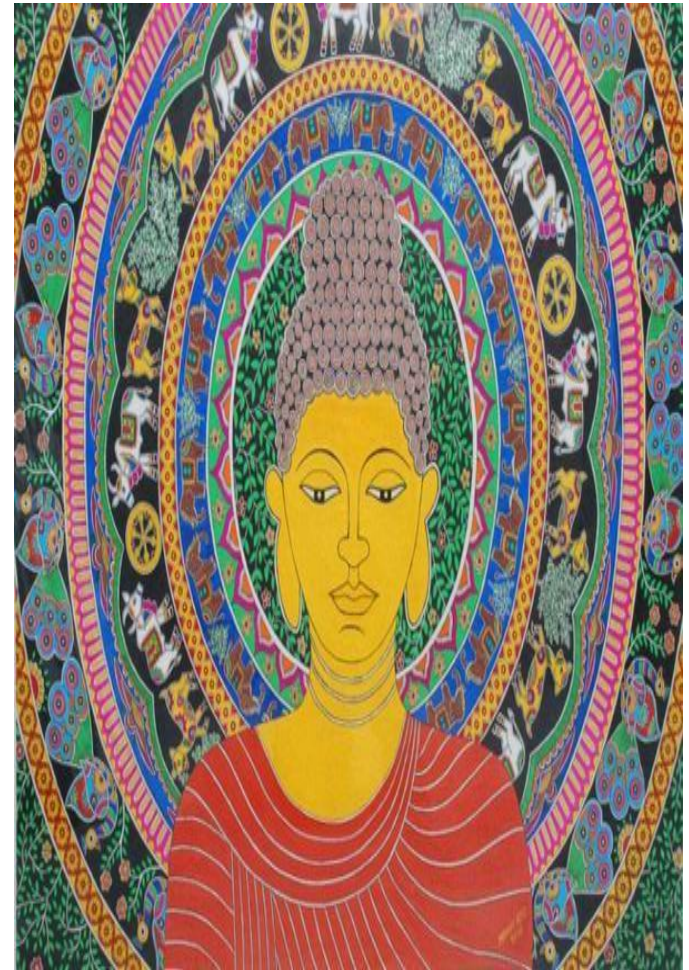


- In those years, the veneration for Ambedkar became increasingly more important than the veneration for any other mass leader.
- Ambedkar was seen as a saviour, who gave India a democratic and socialist constitution and institutionalised reservations for dalits in education, politics and government service.
- Although educated dalits were the first beneficiaries of those reservations, the veneration for Ambedkar was unanimously supported by



# Dalit Acceptance of Buddhism

- The 1980s began with a mass conversion drive by the newly established Dalit Panthers.
- option was open for a conversion into Christianity, Islam, Sikhism and Buddhism.
- It was a radical move, which soon got banned by the police, hence gained even more popularity.
- Although the press stubbornly referred to them as "Harijans" through this move the self-referential name dalit became popular.
- The foundation of the Buddhist 'vihara' (temple) was equally revolutionary.

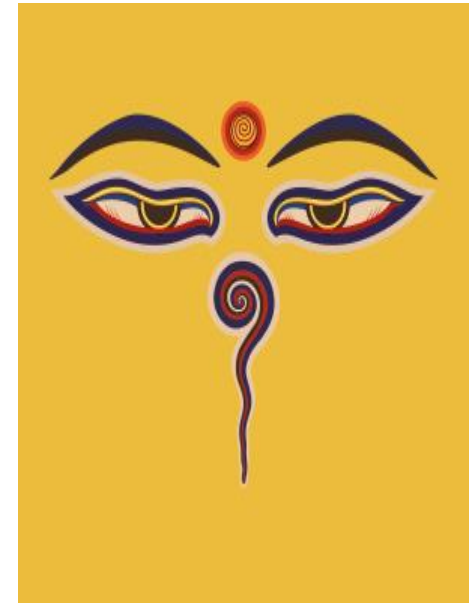


# Historical and philosophical considerations

- Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism and approach to culture has to be located within the enlightenment ethos that arrived in India along with English education that questioned the foundation of beliefs of the colonial people.
- In a very general sense he was part of a generation of 20th century social theorists who lived their formative intellectual lives outside India. Yet in his arguments we can find purposes that place him within the context of activists and scholars struggling to redeem the modern project of emancipation under colonialism.

# Navayana Precepts...

- Navayana Buddhism has a rational and scientific approach to religion.
- The core teachings are the rejection of superstition, the rationality of insights and the internalisation of beliefs.
- The most frequently quoted line from Ambedkar is "In his (Buddhas) opinion, nothing was infallible and nothing could be final.
- Everything must be open to re-examination and re consideration whenever grounds for re-examination and re consideration arise



# Appropriation Through Hinduism...

- Conversion to Buddhism means the total rejection of Hinduism and the caste system.
- The followers of Navayana Buddhism have refuted Hinduism and the caste system, the concepts of karma- fate - and rebirth with the same zeal as Ambedkar.
- Any efforts to appropriate Navayana Buddhism stir up highly emotional discussions.
- Buddhists, they assert, have lost their caste-specific identity.
- Buddhists marry other Buddhists as well as other "Hindu" dalits.
- Buddhists are neither constituting a caste nor a sect, but are still open to both sides

# Ambedkar's Buddha..

- Ambedkar, in his major writings, attempted to show that Buddhism was a social philosophy concerned with fundamental problems like poverty, material want and exploitation.
- His Buddhism unlike that of the Trailokya Buddha Mahasangh, was based on conscious logic and had empirical moorings.
- his conversion movement, though overtly cultural was inherently political inasmuch as it created among the dalits a tendency to negate the cultural domination of the upper castes.

# Religious diversity and conflict of consensus

- An overlapping consensus is a kind of compromise among different and conflicting 'reasonably comprehensive doctrines'.
- there is an overlapping consensus that seems to be emerging between Brahmanical Hinduism and neo-Buddhism in contemporary Indian politics.
- Overlapping consensus is an outcome of some sort of bargain where each position sacrifices something for the sake of larger agreement.
- In such a consensus, no one is entirely satisfied or completely happy, and yet they need to take negotiable positions.

- Buddhism is the result of the rejection of caste-based Hinduism.
- caste can be seen as the significant category that induces mediation between these two comprehensive doctrines
- Though in the context of the conflicting relationship between Brahmanical Hinduism and neo-Buddhism, importing secularism into the discussion would not yield any significant or exciting arguments



# Reasonable pluralism

- A new phenomenon of reasonable pluralism that did not succeed at the level of the Dalit movements in the earlier period seems to be working rather well.
- In reasonable pluralism, reasonable people agree to shave off the rough edges of their political personalities.
- In the early decades of Buddhist conversion there was an ideologically coherent political mobilisation of neo-Buddhist masses against both the Hindutva parties like the Jan Sangha on the one hand, and the bourgeois party like the Congress on the other.
- A comprehensive understanding of Buddhism helped the neo-Buddhists to not only maintain their autonomous political identity, but also articulate it as an independent political mobilisation successfully in contemporary times

# Dalit Paradox

As there are multiple questions in this Dalit Socio-political position, some of them are as follows:

- **How to formulate or analyse the primacy of contradiction or conflict within the larger framework**
- The second problem is of linking the conflictual categories and treating them as one and the same
- **What are the strategies that they employ to deny the Dalits their due and finally who is the power holder?**
- This is the problem that Dalit politics hasn't been able to overcome so far.

# Mutual sense of reverence

- Ambedkar's neo-Buddhism and Brahmanical Hinduism are considered as comprehensive doctrines which are historically incommensurate.
- Why is this so?
- According to Ambedkar, Brahmanical Hinduism is based on the ascending sense of reverence for the top of the twice-born and an ascending sense of repulsion for the lower castes.
- For the untouchable it has a withering sense of respect.
- Neo-Buddhism, on the other hand, seeks to radically even out this hierarchical sense of reverence.
- Put differently, it advocates a mutual sense of reverence.
- It actually suggests withering down of the ego embodied

# Social Reproduction

- The studies of social reproduction are pertinent to the current conceptualisation of ideology
- There is an assumption of consensus.
- There is the other assumption that society is fragmented, that we cannot generate a coherent alternative to the dominant discourse which legitimises and reproduces the system despite opposition.
- The relation of power between caste Hindus and Buddhist Dalits is full of antagonism which is rooted in the economic, religious and political history

# Concept of Nirvana...

- The goal of Buddhism has been primarily seen as attainment of inner peace through the experience of enlightenment often described as nirvana (liberation).
- Now many scholars view Buddhism as a way of enlightenment which further means to be "compassionate, tolerant, reasonable, moral and engaged in life"
- The Buddha, Ambedkar claims rejected four theses on which brahmanic philosophy rested:
  - ***that the Vedas are infallible and cannot be questioned or challenged;***
  - ***salvation of the soul can be had by rituals and sacrifices;***
  - ***principles of a chaturvarna society;***
  - ***and the doctrine of karma.***

- The text 'Buddha and his Dhamma' examines two main premises that at the centre of Dhamma is man and the "relationship of man to man in his life on earth" and that "the purpose of Dhamma is to reconstruct the world".
- He argues that "what the Buddha calls Dhamma differs fundamentally from what is called religion".
- Instead of seeing religion as "personal" which has no role to play in public life, he argues that it is "social".

# Crisis of the time

- Despite constitutional guarantees, individual belief systems related to caste practices in the social sphere had not changed in India:
- Despite modernisation, institutional religion is still very much influencing everyday lives.

# Debate of Conversion...

- Recent debates on conversion seem to be more concerned with "Hindu dalits" and their relationship with the "dominant Hindu social order"
- All this is changing as many groups such as the converted dalit Christians and dalit Muslims have raised their voices for social justice.
- For years dalits have been removed from the Scheduled Caste category if they convert to Christianity or Islam.
- The exclusion of dalit Christians and Muslims has caused great concern as it is contrary to the spirit of a constitution that promotes secularism and freedom of religion



- For Dr, Ambedkar, the reasons for choosing Buddhism were both practical and philosophical.
- He wanted Untouchables to reject the Hindu social order without forfeiting their Indian cultural heritage, and he saw in Buddhism a rational and moral ethic that would challenge the obscurantist elements of Hinduism and provide a philosophy of action for Untouchables.
- Dalit Buddhism can be considered a "popular religion" not because it is less rational or ethical than doctrinal religions, but because it was constituted in the activity of popular struggle, defines its adherents in opposition to the dominant culture, and provides a new identity for Dalits.

# Scientific Analogy of Buddhism...

- Ambedkar drew upon scientific analogies to present the Buddha's view of rebirth.
- The body is composed of elements of matter which, at death, disperse and join the mass of elements in space.
- Eventually, elements from this mass recombine to produce a new birth. The new body may contain elements of various previous bodies, so there is no question of the transmigration of the same soul or sentient being from one life to another; there is only a rebirth of elements.
- Each new birth represents a distinctive combination of elements in a unique individual.
- Thus, Ambedkar explains, Buddha denied the transmigration of the soul but affirmed the existence and regeneration of matter.

# Major challenges in the Dalit-Buddhist Equation today

- challenge 1
- The political discourse initiated by many that centres around the question of whether Buddhism is a part of Hinduism or not.
- A second strong challenge draws on debates on global ethics.
- From the 1970s "traditional Buddhism" and Ambedkarite Buddhism have come into contact with a modernist brand found in Nepal, Tibet and South-east Asia, with its innovative stress on explicating Buddhist principles and its anti-hierarchical stance.

# Challenge 2

- To what extent can Ambedkar's interpretation of social action find a positive meaning in contemporary dalit politics?
- If Buddhism has a social message, and it functions like a civil religion in India; to what extent can it exist without the backing of institutions

# Challenge 3

- “Traditional” Buddhism had no equivalents for such terms as freedom, liberty, individual, action which we use today;
- Similarly Dhamma is attractive and meritorious in many ways but also subject to severe limitations.

# Challenge 4

- Conversion enabled many ex-dalits to join the World Buddhist Community and engage in cross-cultural exchanges ending their isolation as a subjugated group.
- It also enabled them to join forces with other Indian religious minorities.

# Challenge 5

- Buddhism plays an important role in today's dalits youngsters.
- But as it idealises a monastic way of life and prescribes minimalistic lifestyle it may be considered incompatible with the consumerism of contemporary post-capitalist cultures.

Thank you

