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Contesting Caste, Hierarchy, and Hinduism: Buddhist Discursive Practices in Maharashtra

Johannes Beltz

You must take the stand that Buddha took [...] You must have 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?

Twenty years after these appealing and programmatic words, quoted from his famous *Annihilation of Caste* (1979: 69), Dr Ambedkar took the Buddha's stand and converted to Buddhism. Millions of his 'Untouchable' partisans followed his decision in order to protest against the discrimination against them. As a result, large Buddhist communities came into being in Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra, and the proportion of Buddhists in India increased from 0.05 per cent to 0.77 per cent between 1951 and 1991. Sociologists and historians have been studying these collective conversions, and a few attempts have been made to look more systematically into this new form of Buddhism, but a comprehensive study of the new 'religion' is missing. Without entering the controversies of how to apply the concept of religion to Buddhism, I limit my investigations to self-representations of the Buddhist community.¹ I attempt to discuss Buddhist discursive practice through three complementary key notions which express different but overlapping communitarian and religious

identities, that is, Mahār, Buddhist, and Dalit.² Through a systematic analysis of the meaning and use of these notions, the Buddhist movement will be analysed within the framework of social emancipation and diversification, and anti-caste and conversion movements.

STUDYING BUDDHIST DISCOURSE

A few introductory remarks must be first made: The data for this paper were collected between 1994 and 1999 in Maharashtra. I interacted mainly with urban Buddhists, because cities seemed to be centres of the movement. Organizations such as the Buddhist Society of India and Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha are based in places like Mumbai, Aurangabad, Pune, or Nagpur; and most Buddhist literature is published there.

For this research, the sampling was very random. I met leading Buddhist authorities, monks, government officers, Dalit writers, university professors, college teachers, businessmen, rickshaw drivers, landless labourers, and unemployed youth. I interviewed as many individuals as possible, trying to meet persons from different localities and social strata. I discovered a variety of opinions and came to understand that the Buddhist population of Maharashtra was far from a homogeneous group, though it was recruited largely from a single caste, the Mahārs. Many stereotypes have to be reconsidered and abolished, as different degrees of awareness and knowledge of what Buddhism is or should be coexist. It appears very clear that in the Buddhist community, as in any social group, different levels of education, literacy, and other factors lead to differentiation of social strata. A common identity is only shared to a certain degree; however, despite the different voices, I discovered a unity of discourse.

Presenting my data collection entails writing about the institutions that canonize, legitimize, and sometimes supervise the production and spread of the discourse. The first Buddhist association to be mentioned is the Bhikkhu Samgha, because it is characteristic of the Buddhist religion and, in fact, forms its backbone. In Maharashtra, the situation is quite different. Maharashtrian Buddhists are largely a lay community and the Bhikkhu Samgha's importance is rather limited. The number of

monasteries is insignificant, and many Buddhists have never seen a *bhikkhu*. Nevertheless, the *saṃgha* is growing. And if we look at the national level, the impact of Maharashtrian monks cannot be underestimated.³

One must add here that the *bhikkhus* present themselves as followers of the Theravāda tradition, even if this affiliation is often hardly visible in reality. There is another point to raise—the critical evaluation of the *bhikkhu* by Dr Ambedkar. He was irritated when he travelled to Sri Lanka and discovered ‘the rich and selfish monks’; his idea of a *bhikkhu* was very different. He imagined a social worker who works for the benefit of society, not a holy man. It should be noted that certain Buddhists rejected his criticism as unjustified polemics and that the publication of his book, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, provoked a wave of protest and irritation amongst traditionally and conservatively orientated Buddhists, but others appreciated Ambedkar’s criticism. Some leading monks in India, such as Bhikkhu Anand Kausalyayan, actively supported his cause.⁴

The Bhikkhu Saṃgha is not the only Buddhist organization in Maharashtra. There is also the Buddhist Society of India, founded by Ambedkar in 1955. This decentralized and almost defunct association was installed to unite the majority of the Buddhist community. Since its main activities consist of organizing marriage ceremonies and festivities such as Ambedkar’s birthday and day of conversion, one could argue that the Buddhist Society of India functions as a caste organization of ‘ex-Mahārs’ turned Buddhists.

The Trailokya Bauddha Mahasamgha (TBM) is also in Maharashtra. Founded by the British monk, Sangharakshita, this organization has worked in India for the last thirty years. The TBM is interesting to note because it differs from other Buddhist institutions. It combines an explicit non-Christian spiritual background with a strong emphasis on meditation and self-purification as Buddhist practices, in addition to social work. The combination causes irritation and controversy among certain Ambedkarite Buddhists (see Sponberg 1996, Beltz 1997).

Many other associations are run by Buddhists or claim the Buddhist title. Apart from the uncountable local and regional

Buddhist *samājas*, *samitis*, and *sabhās*, which often consist only of a few persons, we have to mention the Dalit Sahitya Akademi as one of the most famous agencies in propagating Ambedkarite Buddhism in India. In this context, the Republican Party of India (RPI) must also be mentioned, although it cannot be evaluated as an authentic Buddhist association because of its secular outlook. Nonetheless, Ambedkar is the RPI's political hero, and most of its members in Maharashtra are Buddhists. The blue flag with the Buddhist *cakra* in its centre clearly symbolizes this particular affinity.

MAJOR THEMES AND TOPICS

Before going into details about themes of the Buddhist discourse, one must keep in mind that Ambedkar originated it. The major part of this discourse can be traced back to him and he remains the central reference within Buddhist discourse, though it has, of course, changed its shape over the years.

Bharatratna Dr Babasaheb B.R. Ambedkar: The Authoritative Reference

If there is anything common in the narrative of a Buddhist landless labourer and a Buddhist businessman, it is their reference to Ambedkar. Even in comparison to the Buddha, Ambedkar is the greater guide. A Buddhist explained to me why Ambedkar is more important than the Buddha himself: *'It is only because of him that we became Buddhists. Through him we came to know about Buddhism.'* In other words, being a Buddhist in Maharashtra means above all to be a follower of Ambedkar. Without any hesitation, people will call him 'Saviour of the Untouchables' or just 'Babasaheb' (honourable father). In the eyes of the Buddhist folk, he is often seen as the ideal leader or *à Bodhisattva*. He uplifted the downtrodden and liberated them from slavery. He introduced the notions of liberty, equality, and fraternity to the Indian Constitution and pressed the Indian government to accept reservations for the scheduled castes in the public sector.

Ambedkar's authority is unquestionable and stories about him circulate in cities and villages. Songs are sung in his honour,

poems depict his glorious life. Furthermore, he is the subject of a number of limited-circulation publications, accessible only in specific regions or areas, published by Dalit and Buddhist intellectuals in English as well as in local languages.⁵ Of course, these texts say more about what their authors think about Ambedkar than about him as an authentic historical figure. They can be considered as hagiographies, and they should be valued as such; they are affirmations of a cultural difference.

Through his conversion Ambedkar can be seen as the founder of a new religion—or, at least, the leader of a religious movement. Paradoxically, he has become an icon, an ultimate authority, although he was firmly against any kind of hero-worship regarding his person. Another even more striking conflict is that although he saw his movement as open for all, his origin identified him largely as the leader of the Mahārs. This makes apparent a contradiction between universal and communitarian values and identities.

Conversion: Leaving the Past and Opting for a Better Future

The second major theme of the Buddhist discourse is conversion itself. Conversion means here the collective acceptance of the new *bauddha dhamma* in 1956. The term used to describe this religious change is *dīkṣā*, meaning ‘initiation’ in Sanskrit as well as in other modern Indian languages. The new affiliation is also conceptualized as *dharmāntara*, a change of *dharma*. In other words, conversion entails a rupture with the so-called Hindu dharma, and Buddhism is imagined as its antagonistic entity.

I was repeatedly told in interviews that Brahminical Hinduism sanctified the caste system and was therefore responsible for the discrimination against and the oppression of the ‘Untouchables’, that is Dalit(s). Being Buddhists, Untouchables adhere to different values, such as liberty, equality, and fraternity. Though this discursive representation illustrates a radical change, the situation is in reality more ambiguous. One could indeed ask how the Mahārs conceptualized their ‘Hinduness’ before their conversion. Considered polluted and impure, they were excluded from certain rituals. One could argue that they never were ‘real’

Hindus. How then did they conceptualize their marginalized status?

Despite this ambiguity, there is little doubt about the actual discourse. Buddhists claim to have gained self-esteem, dignity, pride, and a sense of equality by their conversion. 'We became human beings', I was told many times. In fact, one must recognize the notional dichotomy of the two religions. Buddhism and Hinduism are viewed as two different ways of life as well as distinct social systems.⁶

Achieving Social Equality

As mentioned, Indian Buddhists detest Hinduism especially because of the caste system (*jātivāda*). The Hindu *varṇāśramadharmā* is identified as the conceptual basis of slavery and exploitation, and inequality, as the crucial concept of Hinduism, is denounced. In contrast, *māṇuskī* (humanity) as well as *samatā* (equality) and *nīti* (justice) are Buddhist social ideals. In my interviews, Buddhists claimed that they did not have a caste, 'because in Buddhism there are no castes'.

Again, we have to keep in mind that discursive practices often differ from other social practices, such as marriages. For example, ask any Buddhist what he or she thinks about inter-caste marriages and they will say that it will help to destroy the caste system. But if you ask them if they have had such marriages in their families, they may say they have not. Most marriages among Buddhists are arranged according to the 'old' caste rules. One still reads in marriage announcements in newspapers: 'alliance invited... preference for Buddhist (Mahar) girl'.⁷ It would be unjust to accuse Buddhists of being particularly casteist; after all, in India, inter-caste marriages are generally rare, although this practice is spreading among metropolitans.

The egalitarian Buddhist identity is contrasted to the Hindu communitarian sense of religion. When I asked Buddhists about their caste affiliation, I sometimes received the answer, 'I am Buddhist'. At the same time it became clear that this reply implied no hierarchical claims, but differential ones. It was always affirmed that being a Buddhist means to accept all other castes

as equally ranked. Although Buddhists try to play down the existence of caste in their religious community, the fact remains that they see themselves as a distinct community. Buddhists may prefer the term *samāja* instead of *jāti*, but the contradiction remains. Social and religious identities are intermixing and their clear differentiation is difficult. I will return to this problem at the end of this essay.

Rationalism and Atheism

The third characteristic of Buddhist discourse is its emphasis on rationalism and atheism. Let us recall that Ambedkar himself saw Buddhism as a social philosophy based on morality and science. He distinguished between Buddhist *dhamma* and Hindu *dharma* (Ambedkar 1992: 322–23). According to him, Buddhism was nothing else but ethics that regulate interactions between human beings (Ambedkar 1980: 4–5); it was above blind faith and superstition. Ambedkar liked to emphasize the fact that the Buddha had not wanted people to become his blind disciples.⁸ The Buddha asked people to follow him on the path, but forbade them to believe him; he implored them to always use their own critical mind. According to Ambedkar, Buddhism excludes any belief in God or a supernatural creator and, therefore, only Buddhism could establish universal ethical norms.

The same argument has been reactualized by today's Buddhists. Buddhists do not have a blind faith in a god but believe in their own deeds, in rationalism and science. But this claim is contradicted by quite a 'fundamentalist' tendency among them. Take, for example, the book *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, which is considered to be Ambedkar's *magnum opus*. What is certain is that its authority cannot be questioned; Ambedkar's word has to be accepted as the ultimate truth. Any critique of the book would be considered an attack on his person.⁹ This attitude lacks the critical rationalism of Buddhism that Ambedkar was so intent on underlining. His writings have become canonical and it is not possible to go beyond them. A similar contradiction is that Ambedkar has himself become an icon and an object of ritual worship.

RECONSTRUCTING THE PAST

After having briefly presented the major themes of Buddhist discourse, another particular aspect should be discussed—the making of Buddhist history. Studying Buddhist contemporary literature, one is surprised by its strong historic dimension. It is not only the ‘before’ and ‘after’ of the conversion in 1956, which is narrated again and again, Buddhist discourse goes back to ancient history. India’s ancient past is appropriated and reinterpreted. The painful memory of exploitation and humiliation is transformed into a long history to be proud of.

One of the most interesting elements here is the origin of untouchability, a topic already raised by Ambedkar in his books *Who were the Shudras* (1947) and *The Untouchables* (1948). Let us recall that Ambedkar took a new stand on Indian history in claiming that all formerly Untouchables were ‘broken men’ and that the villainous Brahmins discriminated against them because they were Buddhists. He affirmed that untouchability was born ‘out of the struggle for supremacy between Buddhism and Brahmanism’ (Ambedkar 1990: 379). I agree here with Srinivasan who concluded that ‘these are not scholarly preoccupations for their own sake but are engaged in an instrumental sense’ (Srinivasan 1996: 89). Ambedkar reconstructed history in order to give a new, more prestigious past to the ‘Untouchables’.

Alongside the debate on rivalry between Buddhism and Brahminism is the reappropriation of the Aryan race theory. It is said that the Aryan people invaded India, marginalizing and oppressing the aborigines. Interestingly, today’s ‘Untouchables’ are identified as *ādivāsīs* or *mulānivāsīs*, that is, as non-Aryans.¹⁰ These speculations signify a racist turn in the Buddhist discourse; the problem of caste and untouchability is now discussed in terms of race. Dalit intellectuals claim that the Brahmins are foreign invaders who oppressed the original inhabitants of India, introduced the caste system, and eliminated the indigenous Buddhist culture. The pseudo-scientific literature on this question is abundant and will not be discussed here.¹¹ One must keep in mind that the conflict between races—between immigrants, outsiders, and aborigines—was never Ambedkar’s concern. Denying racial roots for the phenomenon of untouchability, his analysis of

caste is based on cultural and religious differences, not on ethnic exclusivism (Ambedkar 1990: 242).

India's Buddhist past is commemorated as its golden epoch. Its glory and splendour have become part and parcel of the Buddhist imaginary history (see, for instance, Ahir 1972). I was told in my interviews about the epoch when Buddhist Mahārs used to be kings and the rulers of Maharashtra.¹² I have to add here that the appropriation of history is a very dynamic process and not limited to Maharashtra. Aśoka's empire is generally highly esteemed, and the spread of Buddhism into Asia is seen as proof of its superior and universal character. Scholarly debates on history, language, and race are quoted, transformed, and integrated in order to give 'scientific proof' to the arguments. Buddhists have created a sacred topography which includes such classic Buddhist sites as Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, and Sarnath as well as places linked to the life of Dr Ambedkar—*Dikṣābhūmi*, the place of his conversion in Nagpur, and *Caityabhūmi*, the place of his cremation in Mumbai, possess an explicit ritual dimension.

It is interesting to observe the reappropriation of archaeological sites—the caves of Aurangabad, Bhaja, Karla, Ajanta, and Ellora are considered to be genuine Buddhist places, and Maharashtra's Buddhists claim to be their legitimate owners. This is not a mere intellectual exercise for them; petitions are submitted to the Archaeological Survey of India in order to liberate these holy caves from tourist invasions, collective trips and pilgrimages are organised to these sites, and the TBM use the Buddhist caves at Bhaja for conducting meditation camps.

Bodh Gaya, the place where the Buddha is said to have achieved Enlightenment, is probably the most outstanding example of this process of contest and reappropriation. The controversy itself goes back to the end of the nineteenth century and the activities of the great Dharmapala, who fought for the 'liberation' of Bodh Gaya. Buddhists and Hindus have argued for more than a hundred years about the temple property that had passed into the hands of a Hindu. The story is too well known to expound upon here (see Ahir 1994). What is interesting, however, is that this debate has been integrated into the Dalit-Buddhist discourse. Buddhists claim their part in the sacred landscape of India.

Reconstructing history concerns not only ancient Buddhist sites but even 'obviously' Hindu places of worship are claimed to be of Buddhist origin. It is believed that the sanctuary of the Varkaris at Pandharpur in Maharashtra was originally a Buddhist temple and that Vithoba is, in fact, an incarnation of the Buddha. Regarding the Jagannath idol at Puri (Orissa), it is said that Hindus have actually venerated a Buddhist statue. This process of appropriation is not yet complete, as more monuments are sure to be incorporated into the Buddhist mental map.

Finally, we must note that recreating history does not only concern the precolonial past. Buddhists also take a different stand when it comes to the colonial period. The British period is far more positively represented by the Buddhists than by nationalist Hindus. They argue that the British administration promoted social justice and helped the Untouchables. This sympathy for the British reveals historical facts. The Mahārs, as allies of the British at the battle of Korgaon in 1818, defeated the Peshwas, the Brahmin rulers of Maharashtra. Today, this alliance is still remembered by thousands of 'ex-Mahārs', who come to Korgaon in order to commemorate 'their' victory.

CONCEPTUALIZING A NEW AND DISTINCT RITUAL TRADITION

Reconstructing the past is only one aspect of the Buddhist move to claim a distinct socio-religious identity. Another expression of this move, and one even more important, is the change in ritual tradition. To avoid any misunderstanding, it should be recalled that I focus here on the conceptualization of rituals and less on their performance. My investigation concerns three fields of ritual activities—rites of passage, religious worship, and festivals and public manifestations.

Buddhists, like other people, structure their life in periods, which are connected by *saṃskāras* (*rites de passage*). For example, they celebrate the birth of a child, its name giving, and its first haircut with specific rituals. What is interesting to note is that the performed rituals differ from those of their ancient 'Hindu' predecessors. The event as such remains the same, but the ritual

action differs. Different texts are recited, the symbolic setting of statues, pictures, or flags is explicitly Buddhist. The same observation can be made at marriages or death ceremonies, as well as at any other public function. They all reveal a clear break from the old culturally coded pattern. Converting to Buddhism means abandoning the 'old' Hindu gods. On the occasion of the conversion, thousands of Hindu idols were thrown into rivers, and Hindu sanctuaries (*mandira*) were destroyed or transformed into Buddhist temples (*vihāra*).

Ritual differentiation is manifest in the creation of a specific Buddhist calendar (see Mali and Degelurakar 1999). The year is structured according to certain dates such as Ambedkar's *jayantī* (birthday) on 14 April, *dhammacakrapravartana dina* (the day when the 'wheel of the *dhamma*' was turned) on 14 October, and *mahāparinirvāṇa dina* (the day Ambedkar attained the *mahāparinirvāṇa*, that is, the commemoration of his death) on 6 December. These days play a role in community life that cannot be underestimated; they are important occasions to demonstrate group coherence and pride in being Buddhists. On these days people go to Mumbai, Nagpur, or to any local Buddhist temple to pay their respects to him. Although it was certainly not on Ambedkar's mind, he has become part of ritual performances and now possesses a 'sacred' significance for his followers.

Interestingly, Maharashtrian Buddhists adopted the ritual patterns of southern Buddhism as practised in Sri Lanka: Pali *suttas* are recited, *buddha pūjā* and *buddha vandana* are performed daily;¹³ newborn children are named after Buddhist heroes and saints. This conscious borrowing from the Theravāda tradition goes back to Ambedkar, who collected material on his trips to Sri Lanka in order to compose a handbook of Buddhist rituals. A new iconography is also being invented (see Tartakov 1994).

Two points about Buddhist rituals should be emphasized: First, there is a strong move to create a minimal but *distinct* ritual tradition; new rituals are invented, old rituals are abandoned, there is a specific Buddhist way of marrying and celebrating festivals. Of course, the rupture is not to be overestimated; many old traditions and rituals that could be labelled 'Hindu' continued to exist after Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism.

However, it is difficult to attribute certain ritual sequences or objects to particular religious traditions. The use of hymns, candles, flowers, and incense sticks is rather a pan-Indian phenomenon. Despite the similarities, there is a very important difference—Buddhists practise rituals with their own understanding. According to them, they perform Buddhist rituals and practise them *as* Buddhists.

Nevertheless, I observed in some Buddhist houses that *pūjā* was offered to Hindu gods and goddesses. Particularly, if you ask to see the kitchen of the house, you may discover, even in ‘staunch’ Buddhist families, that Vithoba or saints like Saibaba are still venerated. In some villages, Buddhists showed me places where they worshipped their family deity (*kuladevatā*) (see Burra 1996). I have to point out, however, that many Buddhists criticize this attitude, which contradicts the teachings of Dr Ambedkar. For others, veneration of local goddesses represents no contradiction at all; they pray to them in case of sickness. The issue of ‘syncretism’ arises automatically here, but I suggest that we avoid the term in this context. I contest the stand taken by some anthropologists who argue that Maharashtrian Buddhists are syncretistic, because they follow Hindu and Buddhist traditions. According to their understanding, a Buddhist should perform only Buddhist rituals. In other words, he or she should not follow different ritualistic patterns at the same time. However, claiming ‘pure religion’ is always a fiction; in reality, Buddhists as well as Hindus follow multiple ritual practices according to different contexts. Notions of patchwork, or bricolage, express the coexistence of diverse ritual practices.

Richard Gombrich offers an interesting argument to counter exclusivist definitions of religious practices in pointing out that Buddhists have always been allowed to worship other gods.¹⁴ In our case, the argument does not really help, because of the clear atheistic stand of neo-Buddhists. Ambedkar criticized any worship of gods and proclaimed a rationalist and atheist Buddhism. For him, Buddhism was first of all morality and reason, a social philosophy and not an individual matter. He was, therefore, very critical about ritualism, blind belief, and ceremonies (Ambedkar 1992: 249–78). Rituals seemed to contradict the rationalistic

outlook of Buddhism, which he emphasized so much. Nonetheless, Ambedkar himself published a guidebook for Buddhist rituals, understanding their necessity (Ambedkar 1998).

It is interesting to observe that new Buddhist converts take the same ambiguous stand. According to them, rituals have very limited importance. Meditation and diverse forms of daily *pūjā* exist but do not form a major field of Buddhist discourse and action. I was told that 'Buddhists do not pray to God', 'never ask for benefits in their prayer', and 'just pay respect to Gautam Buddha and Babasaheb Ambedkar'. Although an illuminated rationalism is a common topic known from other religious reform movements, this militant atheism is peculiar to the Buddhist movement.

EXTRAPOLATING DISCURSIVE UNITS: DALIT, MAHĀR, BUDDHIST

Throughout the paper I have tried to show that Buddhist discourse covers a wide-ranging contest of caste, hierarchy, and Hinduism. For ex-Mahārs, the notion of *bauddha dhamma* has become a vehicle to affirm a separate cultural and religious identity. Nevertheless, the discourse is far from homogeneous. Different institutions, such as the BSI and TBM, promote divergent opinions on politics and spirituality, though they all belong to the same community. The differing voices and their specific institutional settings can be regrouped according to three key notions, Mahār, Dalit, and Buddhist. These are semantic fields that refer to different universes, that is, the community, the struggle of emancipation, and religious liberation. According to my findings, discursive practices shift permanently between these notions.

Dalit: The Political and Emancipatory Programme (Contesting Caste)

The most significant and militant expression of social protest translates into the term 'Dalit'. Used in the beginning as a translation of the English term 'depressed classes', it soon developed into an autonomous concept. *Dalita*, which originally

meant 'broken' in Sanskrit and Marathi, acquired the sense of 'oppressed' and became a synonym of 'Untouchable'. Discursive constructions around this notion are explicitly anti-caste and emancipatory. Dalit(s) claim to have radically changed and abandoned their inferiority complex. They no longer accept their traditional role as slaves or Harijans. They demand equal rights and social recognition.

Here we face a dissension. Who is a Dalit? All oppressed and exploited people? Are other marginal social groups (such as widows or tribes) included within this social category? Does Dalit refer to a social class? Or does it refer exclusively to ex-Untouchables? One must keep in mind that the notion of Dalit is not accepted by all ex-Untouchables. I must add that the term Dalit is even controversial within the Dalit (Mahār) community. Due to the positive discrimination accorded to scheduled castes (SCs), certain Mahārs could abandon their old menial status and improve their social condition, escaping the suffering and humiliation of their fathers and grandfathers. Today they are more educated and have achieved key positions in the public sector. Articulating their specific social and religious identities through conversion to Buddhism, they compete with other urban elites and subaltern groups. They argue that though they were formerly Dalit(s), they became Buddhists: 'Now we consider ourselves Buddhists', I was told, 'we are not Dalit(s) any more'. In addition to this, they seem to be less politically active. Many times I was told that Buddhism and politics are two different things, not to be confused: 'Buddhism is a religion, a private affair'.

The crucial question remains the communitarian connotation of the category Dalit. Ambedkar was a Mahār, as were/are most of the Dalit writers in Maharashtra, and Vasant Moon in his autobiography sharply described the Dalit movement as a 'Mahār movement' (Moon 2001: 93). Chambhars in Maharashtra indeed openly refuse to identify themselves as Dalit(s) because the term has the connotation of being a Mahār.

Mahār: Affirming Communitarian Solidarity (Contesting Hierarchy)

As I have argued, the most striking contradiction present in the Ambedkarite movement is the caste factor. Ambedkar imagined

Buddhism not only as a religion for Dalit(s) but as a universal ethic. In this vein, the Buddhist community should be a purely ethical community above all frontiers of nationality or caste. But his universalistic intentions did not become a reality. The Buddhist community is formed along caste lines and tensions appear between egalitarian discourse and daily routine.

One could argue that caste is a much too complex social phenomenon to be abolished by a small minority fighting against the majority will. Maharashtrians still actually consider Buddhists a specific caste. In other words, the caste problem cannot be solved by Buddhists alone. However, this argument does not explain why Buddhists still perform marriages according to the old caste pattern. Sociologists such as Bopegamage (1979) have argued that the Mahārs tended only to improve their status within the caste hierarchy. Following the theory of sanskritization, social mobility operates within the caste hierarchy. According to the premise that Untouchables share the same cultural values as Hindus, one may conclude that it would be illogical for them to aim to abolish the caste system. One could therefore regard the Dalit movement as a caste-based movement. But this conclusion is misguided.

Throughout the paper I have intended to show that the term Mahār has attained a positive connotation of emancipation and it contests traditional hierarchies. Being a Mahār is no longer a derogatory term or something shameful, but an identity to be proud of, yet, this pride remains ambivalent. The former Mahārs were discriminated against, lived in poverty, and ate beef. How can one be proud of the suffering they had to accept? The historic dimension of Buddhist discourse attempts to solve that problem. The invention of a glorious Buddhist past and the claim to being the original settlers of Maharashtra replaces the ambivalence with a positive historic identity.

I also hold that the practice of endogamy should not be identified with hierarchical ranking and exclusion of others. One should also not forget that more and more Mahārs, especially in metropolises like Mumbai or Pune, enter into inter-caste marriages. Still Mahārs retain their specificity by redefining themselves as Buddhists. Conversion functions as a marker of

difference. Here one should confuse neither difference with hierarchy, nor communitarian affiliation with exclusive communalism. Difference does not entail the interplay of superiority and inferiority. Identifying oneself as a Mahār does not necessitate the existence of other 'more' downtrodden communities to look down upon. It is often said that Mahārs claim the highest status among Maharashtra's Untouchables, and that they consider themselves superior to the Chambhars and Matangs. I was told by a Buddhist who converted from the Matang community that Buddhists from the Mahār community would not agree to provide a groom for his daughters. I am not denying that the refusal may have been for other reasons and that these instances allow a generalization. The Ambedkarite discourse expresses universal egalitarianism. Even if caste continues to play a role as an identity marker, it does so on a basis of tolerance and equality (*samatā*). Caste does not automatically mean hierarchy but rather, expresses social and religious specificity.¹⁵

Buddhism: Religious Universalism (Contesting Hinduism)

The third important notion in the discursive constructions of the Ambedkarite Buddhists is the *bauddha dhamma*. This thematic complex does not immediately refer to a particular community or to a particular political orientation. Generally most social activists proclaim that the Dalit and Buddhist movements are one and the same thing and that the two terms, 'Dalit' and 'Buddhist', have the same meaning, yet the semantic fields of the terms are distinct. Buddhism refers largely to the teachings of the Buddha, to ritual practices, to Ambedkar's conversion, and to a reconstruction of history. But if we look deeper into the structure of this thematic complex, the same contradiction appears between the communitarian and universal dimensions. One must recognize that almost all Buddhists in Maharashtra are former Mahārs and that, therefore, the term *bauddha*, like the term Dalit, connotes Mahār.

Another point has to be made clear—certain anthropologists make the critique that neo-Buddhists still follow the old Hindu tradition. But this judgement misses the point because it ignores

self-affirmation and the discourse among Buddhist people. Let us recall that Buddhists refuse the prefix 'neo' because of its pejorative connotation. The 'new' convert is considered less trustful and honourable than a person who has belonged to a specific tradition for generations. One should note that 'new' could have a positive significance; those who convert to a different belief system are a notch up from those who simply and passively accept certain teachings as an accident of birth. The 'neo', by this reason, have the courage to dismiss what is 'old' (for them) and accept the 'new'. Still the negative connotation persists.

They are, however, no less Buddhist than Buddhists in other parts of the world. Hence it seems that accusations that conversion to Buddhism did not radically change them are misconceived. It is evident that Buddhists still represent a largely downtrodden, uneducated, and exploited community. But they have abandoned their inferiority complex and they are proud to follow Dr Ambedkar. Even if some Buddhists still follow traditional marriage patterns or worship local deities, this does not mean that they consider themselves to be Hindus.

CONCLUSION

In this essay I attempt to show that there is no omnipresent set of narratives to which all Buddhists subscribe. Rather, a complex ensemble of utterances and sayings exists, and these are expressed according to diverse contexts of communication. Three poles or conceptual units can be extracted from within this dynamic process of discursive creations—the Mahār complex, which re-evaluates the community image through historic speculations, contesting traditional hierarchies; the concept of Dalitness, which expresses resistance, protest, and social emancipation; and the notion of Buddhism, which signifies a universal, egalitarian, but still specific religious non-Hindu identity.

These discursive notions are not the only ones; others could be discussed, such as the notion of *bahujan* (majority) promoted by Kanshi Ram's Bahujan Samaj Party. However, in the present context of Maharashtra, these notions are empirically verifiable and significant. It would be wrong to see any conceptual

development from one notion to another or an exclusive supremacy of one over another.¹⁶ Buddhists themselves hold all three notions. Some employ the term Mahār, Dalit, or Buddhist reluctantly and with hesitation, others do not. Others use all of them, referring to different spheres of life—caste, family and kinship, socio-political awareness, fight for recognition, religious affiliation, and cultural distinction. Though these terms are not to be used as synonyms, they are intimately interconnected. They are also meaningful as analytical extrapolations because they are symptomatic of the present complex and contradictory situation.

Interestingly, these notions correspond to what Timothy Fitzgerald (1994) has analysed as three types of Buddhism in Maharashtra. According to him, the former Mahār community includes, one, a village Buddhism that varies from Hinduism (and which corresponds to my Mahār complex); two, an intellectual, secular, rational, and democratic Buddhism (what I consider to be the Dalit complex); and three, a modernist and soteriological Buddhism (which corresponds to the Buddhist complex). However, these distinctions do not describe the realities I observed during my fieldwork. I would argue that these types can coexist in one person and that the same people can express different discourses, according to multiple situations. I would like to add that I am unable to extract separate and transcendent entities, such as 'Buddhism', from my findings. Remaining at the level of discursive practices, I proposed instead to explore how the notions of Mahār, Dalit, and Buddhist, though belonging to different semantic fields, are connected; how they articulate a common voice, a claim of social, religious, and political specificity, resistance, and revolt.

I also formulate this argument in response to the assessment of Robert Deliège, which maintains that the Untouchables never had a culture or religion of their own. Referring explicitly to conversion movements, Deliège (1995: 304) concludes that the few efforts they made to demarcate themselves from the rest of the society were never successful and that the majority of them know that their only salvation lies in integrating within Indian society. I believe that this argument is misguided and oversimplified. There is little doubt that Maharashtra's Buddhists intend to

integrate into Indian society and that they consider themselves Indians, but they try at the same time to differentiate themselves from the so-called mainstream, claiming a political, religious, and social difference.¹⁷ The explicit refusal to be recognized as Hindus clearly expresses a sense of separateness. It may be true that this stand is more visible among the urban elite than among village Buddhists but the real question is whether or not we acknowledge the Buddhists' claim to recognize their specificity.

ENDNOTES

1. The term 'religion' is not only inadequate because of its Christian origin and Orientalist appropriation, but also because the Buddhist community at large explicitly refuses to identify Buddhism as a religion (Fitzgerald 1997, King 1999).

2. For further details, see my book, *Mahar, Bouddhiste et Dalit* (2001).

3. According to Detlef Kantowsky, the majority of the 1250 monks officially registered in India are of Mahār origin (1999: 139).

4. Anand Kausalyayan (1905–1988) assisted Ambedkar during his conversion in 1956, performed his last rites in Mumbai, and continued to initiate converts into Buddhism. He translated Ambedkar's *The Buddha and His Dhamma* into Hindi in 1961.

5. Two anthologies have been published in English: *An Anthology of Dalit Literature (Poems)*, edited by Mulk Raj Anand and Eleanor Zelliot (1992) and *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*, edited by Arjun Dangle (1992).

6. The conceptual differentiation between the new and the former life as a reorientation and improvement for the better is a common characteristic of what one could define, in an intercultural perspective, as religious conversion. See, for instance, Rambo (1987).

7. See *The Times of India*, Mumbai edition, 9 March 1997, and *The Indian Express*, Pune edition, 9 March 1997.

8. Ambedkar distinguishes the Buddha from Mohammed or Jesus Christ as being only a *mārgadatā* (one who gives the way) and not a *mokṣadatā* (one who gives salvation).

9. The recent edition of *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, edited by Vasant Moon, is a reprint of the original. Minor changes (like introduction of footnotes and correction of spellings) were refused by some leading Buddhist authorities because of the 'sacred' character of the book.

10. See, for instance, the monthly *Mulnavasi Times*, which is subtitled the 'Voice of Liberation of Indigenous People and Their Motherland from Aryan Invaders' and edited by E.D. Khaparde, in Aurangabad.

11. It is affirmed, for example, that Pali is the mother of the Sanskrit language and that the Celts of Britain were Buddhists (see Angar Ee 1994).

12. It is said that the word 'Maharashtra' is a combination of the two terms 'Mahar' and 'rashtra', and means 'Kingdom of the Mahars'.

13. Both terms, *pūjā* (cult, ceremony, adoration) and *vandana* (salutation, homage), signify the Buddhist ritual of honouring the Buddha. In order to underline the atheistic and rational character of Buddhism, the term *vandana* is often preferred.

14. According to Gombrich, Buddhism in Sri Lanka is not atheistic but theistic, i.e., the existence of gods is not contested. Buddhist teaching only concerns individual salvation, thus a Buddhist can worship other gods besides the Buddha (Gombrich 1991: 54–5).

15. See Dipankar Gupta's recent book on caste (2000).

16. With the title of her book, *From Untouchable to Dalit* (1998), Eleanor Zelliott suggests, for example, that such a shift of identity has occurred.

17. I apply here Martin Fuchs' concept of 'Kampf um Differenz' (1999).

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