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**Conversion, Representation and the Dilemma of Religious Identity: A study of Political Pragmatism among Dalits in Northern India, c. 1932-1991.**

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This paper seeks to answer key questions around the Dalits attempts of building an autonomous religious identity since colonial rule, question of representation and the relationship between the Dalits and the Hindu revivalist politics. In this paper, I would trace the historicity of the inter relationship between the right to religious freedom and reservation provided under article 25 and 16 in the favour of Dalits. If one has to opt for one, then they have to lose the other. This dilemma shaped the religious question of the Dalits after Dr. Ambedkar’s call for religious conversion in 1956. He argued that religious conversion is very important for the emancipation of Dalits from the life of degradation and deprivation. But the contradiction enriched in the Scheduled Caste Order of 1950 and religious freedom as fundamental rights provided in constitution discourages Dalits call of conversion. Although, this SC order has been amended multiple times, firstly Sikh Dalits in 1956s and Buddhist Dalits had been granted Scheduled Caste Status in 1990. An urge for autonomous identity was the pertinent question of the Dalit movement in the colonial time, which they successfully achieved in the Macdonald award. Later on, the Poona pact, shifted the entire claim of autonomous identity to the accommodative representation politics. Although, the constitution has assured the representation of the Dalits, but they had sacrificed the claim of autonomous identity and lost the battle to be recognised as a minority. It has significantly affected modern-day Indian politics and also gave free hand to the Hindu revivalist to co-opt and assimilate Dalits into the Hindu fold.

Hindu reform was an expansionary exercise that shored up a Hindu majority even as it accommodated ex-Untouchables for its political benefits. Several actors and organisations had overlapping approaches towards co-opting Untouchables into caste-Hindu politics. The Arya Samaj, the Hindu Mahasabha, the RSS, and the Congress worked with very similar strategies to absorb autonomous movements of the Untouchables into the Hindu majority by neutralising claims to minority status. This was done primarily by repeatedly articulating the 'problem' of the Untouchables within the realm of the social, rather than the political. The significance of religious conversion at the beginning of the 20th century, the Adi-Hindu formulation of the 'original inhabitant' theory, and Dr. Ambedkar's political formulation after the 1930s were all directed to counter the imposed Hindu identity upon the Untouchables and objectively form a political minority. The Government of India enumerated ex-Untouchables as Hindus despite recognizing their autonomous belief systems. It was only in the 1920s for the first time they paid attention to the cause of the Untouchables and made the special provision of education and representation. Later in the 1930s, the Government of India recognized ‘Untouchables’ as a distinct minority under the Macdonald Award but a decade later, caste Hindu leadership were firmly entrenched as the sole party to decide the future of the Untouchables.

Historiography has dominantly linked the concept of ‘Hindu Nationalism’ or Hindu majoritarianism exclusively with ‘communal,’ ‘sectarian’, or ‘reformist/revivalist’ organizations like the Arya Samaj, the Hindu Mahasabha, and the RSS, often to the exclusion of the ‘secular’ Indian National Congress. Sumit Sarkar, Christophe Jaffrelot, and Kenneth Jones have investigated the making of a Hindu Majority formation by looking into the activities of the Arya Samaj, Hindu Mahasabha and RSS, and have highlighted the links between political representation with the process of enumeration. They have argued that the competitive logic of numbers made possible by census enumeration acquired greater saliency through the gradual spread of representative institutions.

Gyanendra Pandey and Jaffrelot found the roots of Hindu Nationalism in the modern politics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Jaffrelot has argued that the modern phenomenon of a Hindu was developed using ideology-building strategies, despite the original characteristics of a diverse set of practices clubbed under the rubric of Hinduism.[[1]](#footnote-1) Pandey suggests that the politicized use of ‘communalism’ in the 1920s and 1930s, contributed to the constitution of Hindu and Muslim identities out of diversely self-conceptualised groups in the 20th century.[[2]](#footnote-2)

***Conversion and Enumeration in the Age of Communal Politics***

The 1911 census recorded the conversion of 1,50,000 individuals into Christianity and Islam, of which Chamars and Chuhra constituted almost 50 percent.[[3]](#footnote-3) Yet it is important to underscore the top-down nature of census classification which leaves no room to enquire into the perspectives of those who had converted. As a large population of the Untouchables were unaware of their categorization on the ground, the categorization in the census came from the above. The conversion of Untouchables quickly became a cause of concern for Caste Hindu leadership when E. H. Gait, the Census Commissioner issued a circular announcing a new category of ‘debatable Hindus’ to place the Untouchable castes.[[4]](#footnote-4) Conversions posed a direct threat to caste Hindu leadership in the era of communal representation in which census enumerations decided, quite literally, the political weight of India's communities. The deep anxiety surrounding this matter is visible in a letter written by M. M. Malviya, then president of the Indian National Congress to the Secretary of State, protesting against any change in the status of Untouchables in the 1911 census. The Arya Samaj, which called on its members to declare themselves as 'Aryans' and was enumerated as a separate category in the 1901 census, gave in to caste Hindu anxieties by 1911.[[5]](#footnote-5) This change in strategy was concurrent with the organisation’s proselytization among the Untouchables, to counter the activities of Christian missions.[[6]](#footnote-6) In the United Provinces, Untouchables who converted to Christianity were also counted as Hindus in the school enrollment. For the Indian National Congress, what was a marginal issue, acquired centre-stage due to the politics of the census. Dadabhai Naoroji, in the Imperial legislative council, tied the stakes of the organisation’s goals with the unresolved problem of untouchability. Less than a decade earlier, Gokhle had invoked an ancient Hindu past as a glorious civilization, without finding the need to address untouchability. By 1916, with the signing of the Lucknow Pact between the Indian National Congress and the All India Muslim League, the Untouchable question was sidelined in a polarized political context.

Anti-caste leadership mobilized Untouchables based on the theory of the 'original inhabitant,' which had its genesis in the Aryan proclamation by the caste Hindus. The Adi-Hindu, Adi-Dharma, Adi-Andhra, and Adi-Dravida grew into multiple regional political assertions of the Untouchables. This moment can be marked as the first political encounter between Caste Hindus and anti-caste leadership, and it is crucial to note the fundamental tensions present in attempts at inclusion that did not address the historic exclusion of a community. Yet, Hindus derived their legitimate hold on Untouchables from the census, and hence census became the legitimator of all identities.[[7]](#footnote-7) On the other hand, Untouchable assertion stemmed from a shared history of oppression. Michael Dawson has argued that a sense of 'linked fate' that arose from a shared history and commonly lived experiences among African Americans deeply structures the community's self-perception and the identification of significant political, social, and especially economic differences between African Americans and other groups, specifically White Americans.[[8]](#footnote-8) Similarly, multiple Untouchable castes built associations based on the common experience of untouchability and claimed their rights based on this social and political marginalisation.

***The Politics of Uplift: Attempt of Co-opting ‘Untouchables’***

The politics surrounding communal representation contributed to the centralization of the regionally divided ex-Untouchables castes under the formation of a constitutional Depressed Classes. The extension of the franchise and the provision of the direct elections by the Government of India Act of 1919, laid the grounds for religious competition among the Caste Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, resulting in increased force to the proselytizing practices such as *shuddhi*, *tanzim*, and *tabligh*. While the strong presence of the Arya Samaj activities aided the co-option of the Untouchables, the activities of the Jatav Mahasabha, which followed the Arya Samaj model of socio-cultural reform, also played into co-optive politics. Meanwhile, the Adi-Hindu movement’s central theory of the Untouchable as the ‘original inhabitant’, countered Hindu expansion to varying degrees of success.

While the two organized movements had overlapping objectives, especially in the domain of representation and in their demands to increase educational opportunities, their respective historical imagination was deeply contradictory with each other. The Adi movement radically envisaged a counter-narrative of origins and emphasised a new, positive identity against the existing identity of an 'Untouchable' within the Hindu hierarchy. The movement turned the Aryan theory of origins on its head and pointed to it as the *origins* of deprivation and degradation of the Untouchables. A swell of popularity greeted the Adi- movement leadership and sustained the separation of the Untouchable cause from Hindu claims. On the other hand, the Jatav movement's claims for higher social status regurgitated the tone and strategies of Hindu revivalism. While the Adi-Hindu idea enjoyed popularity and strong roots in the community, it lacked resources for sustained interventions, limiting the nature of its work to the grassroots. Scholars have noted the patronage enjoyed by caste Hindu-led organizations from landlords and capitalists. For instance, Francesca Orsini has traced the role of caste-Hindu-operated Hindi literary journals, newspapers, and magazines in the making of Hindu Nationalism.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In a hierarchical social order, caste has acted as a source and mechanism of exclusion for certain groups of people resulting in disadvantage and deprivation. The perpetual deprivation of the people belonging to the lowest rung of the caste system for the past many centuries has acted as a powerful force in the construction of an identity of the deprived and oppressed. [[10]](#footnote-10) The Untouchables were constantly in the process of reconstructing their identity. In Gramscian terminology, the Untouchables are continuously fighting a ‘war of position’ against the hegemonic Brahmanical structure. This construction and reconstruction of identity remained an important method in fighting against the hegemonic caste system. The Adi-Hindu, Adi-Andhra, Adi- Dravida, and Adi-Bangla were attempts of the Untouchables to establish a counter-hegemony against resurgent Hinduism. The Adi concept brings an antithesis to the Caste Hindu conceptualisation of the Aryan race based on the Vedic civilization. The Adi movement articulated a convincing theory for the deprivation and the subjugation of the Untouchables and delineated a narrative of counter-hegemony against emerging Hindu majoritarianism.

The Adi movement was quick to 'uncover' the true agenda of Hindu reform organisations as not lying in societal transformation, but absorption into the Hindu fold. Swami Acchutanand, the founder of the Adi-Hindu movement claimed that the Arya Samaj 'aimed to make all Hindus slaves of the Vedas and the Brahmins.'[[11]](#footnote-11) Nandini Gooptu has argued that the Adi-Hindu identity based its opposition and repudiation of Vedic Hinduism on how it embraced Bhakti.[[12]](#footnote-12)

There was a strong parallels between the work of the Arya Samaj and Hindu Mahasabha at the ground-level, and the political articulations of the Congress. *Shuddhi* activities of the Arya Samaj became more pronounced during the 1920s. In 1923, the Hindu Mahasabha voted in favour of resolutions calling for the Untouchables to enjoy full access to roads, schools, wells, and even temples.[[13]](#footnote-13)Although the outlined objective of the organization was the removal of the untouchability, the activities were mostly directed to stop the conversion of Untouchables to other religious groups. This fear is apparent in M.M Malviya's warnings of a bleak future if conversion were to continue unabated.[[14]](#footnote-14) Similarly, Lala Lajpat Rai warned that this dangerous negligence of the Untouchables would be suicidal for the Hindus.[[15]](#footnote-15) Concerned over a reducing Hindu demography, Swami Shradhanand formed the All India Dalitoudhar Mahasabha to target the communities with uplift. In 1928, the Dalitodhar Sabha claimed that it had converted over 48 Muslim families and 282 families of 2887 Christians into the Hindu fold.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Chinnaiah Jangam has argued that the all-encompassing nationalism dominated by caste Hindu elites became an irresistible force that drew Untouchables into its stream despite their awareness of the Hindu Brahmanical undertow. Left with few alternatives, the Untouchables had to carve out a niche for themselves and articulate an alternative view of nation and nationalism separate from the dominant ideas and values.[[17]](#footnote-17) Yet, this was an arduous process that faced violent pushbacks. Romila Thapar has argued that the ‘identity of a ‘Hindu’ tends to iron out diversity and insists on conformity, for it is only through a uniform acceptance of the religion that it can best be used for political ends. The attempt is always to draw in as many people as possible since numbers enhance the power of the communal group and are crucial in a mechanical democracy’.[[18]](#footnote-18) Thapar further held that the vagueness of what constitutes a Hindu was to the advantage of those propagating a Hindu community. It encouraged an almost new perception of the social and political uses of religion. Conversion to Hinduism was *invented,* largely to bring the Untouchables and the tribals into the fold of the religion.[[19]](#footnote-19)

***Untouchables’ claim for minority status and caste Hindu protest***

Before the 1930s, the Congress' top leadership distanced itself from the Arya Samaj’s *Shuddhi* movements and the Mahasabha’s reconversion programs by citing their non-involvement and religious tolerance. But the 1930s exposed the hollowness in the Congress's claims of neutrality when the Colonial government declared a separate settlement for the Untouchables with the declaration of the Macdonald award (Communal Award, 1932). The Congress aggressively opposed separate political representation as they perceived religious conversion to pose a serious threat. Whereas scholars have treated Congress's stand as a secular body, but Congress's politics played an important part in the consolidation Hindu majority. As Shabnum Tejani has argued, secular nationalism in India "needed Muslims to be a minority and Untouchables to be Hindus."[[20]](#footnote-20) The making of a Hindu majority was premised on the encompassment of Untouchables within the Hindu community despite strong objections.[[21]](#footnote-21)

A long time lapsed between Ambedkar's declaration to leave Hinduism at Nasik in 1935 and his call of conversion to Buddhism in 1956. Caste Hindu led neutralization of conversions was realised in this political vacuum. In this phase, the anti-caste politics failed to envisage a religious alternative for the Untouchables as the Adi movement had in the 1920s. The political representation under joint electorates harmed Untouchable autonomous politics, and gave exclusive power to caste Hindus for deciding the political fortunes of the Untouchables.

In the second Round Table Conference, Dr Ambedkar and R. Srinivasan, as members of the Minority Pact, submitted a memorandum titled '*A scheme of political safeguards for the protection of the Depressed Classes in the future constitution of self-governing India.*' The memorandum demanded separate representations for the Depressed Classes and the recognition of depressed classes as a distinct category outside the Hindu fold while determining the franchise.[[22]](#footnote-22) The Hindu Mahasabha under the presidentship of B.S.Moonje came together with M.C. Raja, and famously signed the ‘Raja-Moonje Pact’ agreeing on the joint electorate system between the Depressed classes and Caste Hindus. This nationalist propaganda machinery projected this moment as a political agreement between the Untouchables and caste Hindus. Yet, scholarship has not investigated the compulsions behind the Hindu Mahasabha’s pact with M.C.Rajah and its political rejection by Depressed class organizations operating in different provinces including the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha.

On 6th August 1932, with the announcement of the Macdonald award, the colonial government for the first time recognized Untouchables as a separate category with the provision of a separate settlement, and at par with Muslims and Sikhs. Thus, Untouchables were recognized as the second substantiated political minority after Muslims in terms of demography. This was a zero-sum game for the Hindus because the recognition of Untouchables as a separate entity also reduced Hindus as minorities, or rather produced an unimpressive majority. This move of the colonial government became the biggest challenge for the caste Hindu politics and hence became a matter of survival of the Hindu politics in the coming future. M.K. Gandhi along with several other leaders went on a *satyagraha* and threatened the colonial government with his life if this decision was not rolled back. Gandhi understood the importance of the Depressed classes for the survival of Hindu politics. The signing of the Poona Pact on the 24th of September 1932, concluded this tense face-off as Dr. Ambedkar agreed to the joint electorates in place of the separate electorates. At the Banaras session of the Hindu Mahasabha, Rajendra Prasad argued that allowing the Depressed classes to avail the separate electorates would have led the nation to the same problem as it was witnessing with the Muslims.[[23]](#footnote-23) Although Scheduled Castes emerged as a distinct political category, the episode gave an edge to the Hindu reformist and Nationalist efforts to assimilate and co-opt Untouchables into the Hindu religious fold.

The Government of India Act of 1935 defined the Scheduled Caste as a distinct category and made constitutional provisions for the representation of the Scheduled Castes in the legislative and the bureaucracy. The Government of India (Schedule Caste) order was issued under this Act. Paragraph three of this Act however, excluded the Christian converted Untouchables and the Buddhism or Tribal religion practitioners in Bengal from being recognized as Scheduled Castes. After Independence, the Constitution (Scheduled caste) Order of 1950, was amended, and it excluded Muslim, Christian, Sikh and Buddhist converted scheduled castes from availing the benefits of representation under Articles 15, 16 and 341. This order was a formal attempt to restrict the conversion of the Untouchables to another religious sect other than Hinduism, and so dealt a heavy blow to the 'anti-systematic'[[24]](#footnote-24) elements of the anti-caste movement. The Adi Dharma identity had offered a social recognition for the Scheduled Castes through the process of cultural transformation and spiritual regeneration.[[25]](#footnote-25) Representation politics offered political recognition but shifted away from the Untouchable’s need of religious alternatives in their struggle for liberty. Ronki Ram has argued, perhaps controversially, that Untouchables became victims of their Dalit consciousness which, instead of transcending caste and caste-based hierarchies, strengthened caste identities in constitutional politics.

The signing of the secret Ambedkar-Moonje Pact was another historical moment in which the political interests of Caste Hindus and Untouchables merged counterintuitively.[[26]](#footnote-26) Both Ambedkar and Moonje had agreed to keep the Pact secret until Ambedkar had decided conclusively in favour of his conversion to Sikhism, and Moonje could get the Pact approved by the Hindu Mahasabha leadership. Until the Yeola conference, the Hindu Masabaha and the Indian National Congress worked hand-in-hand to target and prevent the conversion of the Untouchables and yet, the Mahasabha openly came forward to admit the religious conversion of the Untouchables to Sikhism. It is important to note however, the Mahasabha’s differential positions towards Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism, which they believed to be a part of Hinduism, and Islam, which constituted an ‘other.’ Dr. Kurtkoti, the Shankacharaya of *Karweer Pith*, while chairing the Mahasabha’s Lahore session of 1936, stated that conversion of the Untouchables to Sikhism was not conversion, since ‘conversion’ implies embracing an alien faith.[[27]](#footnote-27)The Pact received severe criticism from the Caste Hindu loyalist Scheduled Caste leaders like M.C.Rajah, P.N. Rajbhoj, Gawai, and Dharam Prakash among others. The pact also became the reason for the estrangement of sanatani leaders like M.M.Malviya, who had enjoyed a cordial relationship with the Mahasabha previously.

***Electoral Politics and Decline of the ‘Untouchable Minority’***

The declaration of the general elections at the Provincial level in 1937 made Scheduled caste leadership think about the political organization to represent Untouchables. Dr Ambedkar formed the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and the major energy was directed towards the political domain in which he made several alliances. Several strands of regionally assertive voices within Dalit movements across different provinces culminated in the formation of the All-India Scheduled Caste Federation under the leadership of Dr Ambedkar in 1942. Important leaders like M.C.Rajah, P.N.Rajbhoj, Gawai, and Dharam Singh detached from the Indian National Congress and began working with Dr. Ambedkar. In 1942, Ambedkar and Rajah were invited to take part in the proceedings of the Cripps Mission as Scheduled Caste representatives. In a memorandum on the Depressed Classes' response to the Cripps Proposals, Ambedkar reiterated his demand for the recognition of the Untouchables as a minority. He pointed specifically towards the irregularity in recognising Sikhs and Muslims as minorities for political safeguards, while denying the same for Depressed Classes.

However, the post-war complexities of the 1940s were not as easy for the Untouchables to navigate. The Government of India identified the Congress as the only legitimate organisation to deal with the political question of Hindu representation based on the results of 1945-46 elections. Unlike the Cripps Mission, the Cabinet Mission met the leaders of the All-India Depressed Classes League including Jagjeevan Ram, Prithvi Azad, and Radhadeb Das. The League also submitted a memorandum in which they placed their faith in the Congress to speak for the Scheduled Castes. The electoral politics gave legitimacy to the Scheduled Caste leader like Jagjivan Ram and others to talk on the behalf of the Congress. Several leaders of the Adi movement were also accommodated by the Congress in electoral politics. At a meeting presided over by Jogendranath Mondal in Calcutta, Ambedkar described the Cabinet Mission's proposal as an 'atom bomb' that 'has been dropped on the cause of the Scheduled Caste in India’[[28]](#footnote-28).

Distorted interpretations of Scheduled caste representatives elected from SC constituencies became a powerful propaganda tool for the Congress’ claim that it enjoyed widespread support from Scheduled Castes. There is an interrelation between the SC representation and the Hindu consolidation. Dr. Ambedkar outlines the working of this dummy representation in his book, ‘*What Congress and Gandhi did to Untouchables?*’ which also highlights the problems in the election procedure of electing a representative in a Scheduled caste constituency. In 1945, the Government of India misinterpreted election results and the winning ratio of the SC candidates in the Congress which was refuted by Dr. Ambedkar.[[29]](#footnote-29) Ramnarayan Rawat has argued that the Dalits of UP articulated an inclusive *achhut* identity to mobilize diverse sections of Dalit society based on the agenda of claiming political power.[[30]](#footnote-30) Here we have to distinguish between the social and the political as two distinct realms of power politics, and identity. This paper argues that political mobilization remained the only available domain for mobilization for the Untouchables, within which, the separate electorate became the prominent demand. At the same time, dummy representation gave undue advantage to Hindu propaganda and its claim that the Hindu religion is integral to the identity of the Scheduled Castes.

**Post-Independence politics and the New Challenges**

During the Adi Hindu movement, the narrative of a glorified past performed this political function for the Dalits. A poem by Swami Acchutanand reads,

*Aaye the yahan Arya aye, Tumko Das ban aabad ho;*

*Vo jeet ‘Hari’ Malik huye, tum Das ban aabad ho.*

*Purkhe tumhare the Baadshah*[[31]](#footnote-31)

Your ancestors were rulers once, whether you remember or not.

Aryans came here from outside [the land],

and they made you slaves and settled here.

The legacy of the theory of *mulnivasi* or original inhabitant was carried forward by local Dalit activists. In the 1960s, the Republican Party and Buddh Mahasabha activists such as Buddha Sangh Premi campaigned extensively to spread the concept of the Dalit as a *mulnivasi*. In his poem on the Dalit claim for the original inhabitant of the land, Premi wrote,

*Hum mulnivasi bharat ke they,*

*Hume sataya logo ne,*

*Khud to unche ban baithe,*

*Aur Neech bataya humlogo ko.[[32]](#footnote-32)*

We were the original habitants of India,

we were oppressed by the people,

and they (Aryans) made themselves superior and treated us as untouchables.

Although Dr.Ambedkar had rejected the notion of the Dalit as a *mulnivasi*, the identity held great sway among the activists working in Uttar Pradesh, linking the Dalit movement in independent India with the narratives popularized by the earlier Adi-Hindu movement. With Dr.Ambedkar’s conversion to Budhism in 1956, the identity did not fade away, and instead assumed a new shape in the claims of Dalit-Buddhists being the original inhabitants of the land. Songs, poetry and plays became a powerful tool to mobilize a population devoid of basic education. Banarsi Das, an activist of the Buddhist Society of India, argued that the culture of performative songs and theatre were very prevalent in Dalit community for a long time.[[33]](#footnote-33) In Kabir *satsangs* people sang anti-caste songs and *dohas* although caste Hindus have attempted to mould the teachings of Kabir and Ravidas for their political gains.[[34]](#footnote-34) According to him, the *bijaks* performed by the *Kabirpanthis* in their localities were very different from the brahmanical interpretations of Kabir, which identified ‘Ram’ as a divine entity as opposed to the *kabirpanthi’s* denial of a God.[[35]](#footnote-35) He quoted a *kabirpanthi* couplet,

*Tum jago mulnivasi ghar mei thare chor base,*

*char chor paschim se aaye brahma vishnu Mahesh.*[[36]](#footnote-36)

Beware, original habitants of this land, your home is invaded by thieves they came from the west (Aryans), claimed themselves as Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh.

Here, Kabir warns *mulnivasis* about the exploitative Aryans and refers to them as c*hor (thief)*. Nandini Gooptu argues that the untouchable communities attacked caste inequalities through an assertion of bhakti devotionalism, a rejection of vedic Hinduism and the construction of a pre-Aryan identity of the untouchables as the original inhabitants, Adi-Hindu of India.[[37]](#footnote-37) Das’s experience about cultural movement among the Dalits reverberates with Gooptu’s argument regarding the bhakti devotionalism among the Dalits.

Buddha Sangh Premi[[38]](#footnote-38), poems inculcated a sense of hope and aspiration among the Dalits to find their way out of social subjugation. His criticisms of the Hindu religion in his powerful poetic works, appealed enormously to the Dalit community and encourage them to convert to Buddhism. Premi’s biography of Dr. Ambedkar documents the significant incidents in the latter’s life in the form of poetry. One such poems reads,

‘*Brahaman na varn banaya hota, Jati ka na jahar falaya haota*

*Lakhko logo ke sang, Bhim ne Buddha dharm na apnaya hota*.’[[39]](#footnote-39)

Had Brahmins not constructed the Varna system, or had caste not oppressed people, millions would not have followed in the path of Ambedkar when he converted to Buddhism.

The abrogation of the Poona pact remained an important part of Scheduled Caste politics. Buddha Priya Maurya, the face of the RPI in Uttar Pradesh, was against reserved constituencies allotted for the Scheduled Castes and announced he would never contest from one. The Republican Party also opposed the extension of seats reserved for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes in in the Bombay legislative assembly and contended that the practice did not serve the interests of the Scheduled Castes.[[40]](#footnote-40) Kanshiram, the founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party, held a huge demonstration on the 50th anniversary of the Poona Pact and released a book named *Chamcha Age* (The Age of Stooges) on the same day.[[41]](#footnote-41) The book explains the impact of the Pact in damaging the political fortunes of the Dalits. Kanshiram also established a Buddhist Research Centre to ideate and theorize on the religious claims and identities of the Dalits. Aware that movement did not uniformly and systematically follow Ambedkar’s call for Dalit conversion to Buddhism, Kanshiram pointed out that earlier programs had limited reach since they lacked research. The Buddhist Research Centre’s work was based on three parameters that would evaluate the ‘need,’ ‘determination’ and the promise of ‘equality’.[[42]](#footnote-42) Premlata Gautam a Dalit activist from Delhi wrote in the context of the Poona Pact that

‘*Gandhi ji agar baba se, kar jate na beimani*

*,to aaj tumari Dalito, hoti kuch aur kahani’.[[43]](#footnote-43)*

If Gandhiji had not betrayed Babasahib Ambedkar, then your (Dalit) story would be different

Banarsi Dasheld that it is the failure of Representation politics for neglecting the propagation of Buddhism in their social and the political programs. As a result, brahmanical traditions have been largely accepted and continues to be practiced extensively by dalit communities today. For Das, heavy emphasis on representation politics at the cost of disseminating the social significance of religious conversions is one of the primary reasons for the penetration of the Hindu rituals and the traditions among the Dalit community. Das believed that since occupying political power, the BSP became less vocal in its critique of both Hinduism and caste Hindu domination. This, according to him, has compromised the party’s founding ideologies to a cynical political pragmatism. But this view needs to be scrutinised under the constitutional arrangement which made the conversion as the difficult choice for the Dalits. Article 341(1) of the Indian Constitution gave the president the responsibility for specifying the Scheduled Castes. The 1950 Scheduled Castes Order listed these communities and included a significant clause: “No person who professes a religion different from Hinduism shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste.” Dr Ambedkar although was hopeful about conversion. He said, “Even after conversion to Buddhism, I am confident, I will get the political rights.” Dr Ambedkar died within a few months after his conversion and Buddhists were not included as SCs until the 1990s. Even after the 1990s the Dalits were facing difficulty getting SC certificates. Inderbaliconverted to Buddhism during a BAMCEF program in Ambedkar Bhawan but he is still struggling to receive his certificate of the conversion. Although he had denounced Hinduism, his documents continue to identify him as one.[[44]](#footnote-44)

**Conclusion**

This paper evaluates whether religious freedom enshrined in the Indian constitution is equally applicable to Dalits in a practical sense. The Schedule Caste Orders between 1950 and 1990 has shaped and retained a Hindu majority. Vertical hierarchies endemic to the structure of the caste have been significantly utilized by the caste Hindus for strengthening their control over the Dalits. In a system of ‘graded inequality’ to use Ambedkar’s language, the contradictions within the marginalized castes became acutely visible, particularly after the development of constitutional representation. Amidst, an unfavourable constitutional condition, the autonomous tenets of the anti-caste politics has been sustained with the political pragmatism of Dalit activists. Fundamentally, the paper explores the tensions in the processes through which Untouchables were made part of the Hindu majority but never Hindu society.

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11. Extracts from speeches in Acchutanand biography, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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22. Vasnat Moon, ed. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches (Volume No. 9) (New Delhi: Dr Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), pp. 51-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Police Abstracts of Intelligence (PAI), CID Headquarters, Gokhale Marg, Lucknow, 24 September 1932. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Gail Omvedt classified Dalit and the non–Brahman anti-caste movement as the 'anti-systematic movements' that challenged and sought to transform the basic structure based on caste and replaced it with an equalitarian society. See Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the democratic revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit movement in colonial India*. (New Delhi: SAGE Publications India, 1994), p.10. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ronki Ram, "Untouchability, Dalit consciousness, and the Ad Dharm movement in Punjab." Contributions to Indian sociology 38, no. 3 (2004): 347. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. On 13th October 1935, at the Yeola conference, Dr. Ambedkar announced to leave Hinduism and held that although born Hindu was not in his hand he would not die as a Hindu. This created widespread angst among the caste Hindu circles. He was exploring other religions and found Sikhism as close to his ideals. In June 1936 almost one year after the Yeola call of leaving Hinduism Dr Ambedkar signed a pact with B.S. Moonje famously known as Ambedkar- Moonje Pact. According to the pact, Dr Ambedkar agreed to lead a Sikh conversion movement and to join Hindus and Sikhs in countering Muslim and Christian proselytising among the Untouchables. Moonje, in return, pledged the Hindu Mahasabha’s support for the Sikh converts retaining the political rights that had been accorded them as (Hindu) Untouchables under the 1932 Poona Pact. See, *Indian Annual Register* (1936), Vol.2, pp.276. ( South Asia Archive) [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Indian Annual Register (1936), Vol.2, p.258. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Times of India, 1 July 1946, p. 6. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Times of India, 22 July 1946, p. 9. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ramnarayan S. Rawat. “Making Claims for Power: A New Agenda in Dalit Politics of Uttar Pradesh, 1946-48.” *Modern Asian Studies* 37, no. 3 (July 2003): 585–612. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Swami Acchutanand, *Harihar Bhajan Mala* (Hindi) (Agra), 1913. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Buddha Sangh Premi, *Apman ka Badla* (Hindi) (New Delhi: *Panchchsheel Lok Sahitya Prakshan*, 1979), p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Banarsi Das, born in 1946, is an Ambedkarite Activist and lawyer in Munirka, Delhi. He is associated with the anti-caste movement since 1962 and became a member of the Buddhist Society of India. With his efforts, a branch of the Buddhist Society was opened in Munirka on 12 October 1967. He later became the president of this Buddhist society. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Personal Interview with Mr. Banarsi Das in Munirka, New Delhi (7 February 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.144. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Buddha Sangh Premi was a *Prachar Mantri* or campaign minister of the Shahdara (Delhi) branch of the Bharatiya Buddha Mahasabha in the 1970s, he penned poems depicting the pain, sufferings, assertion, and historical narratives of the Dalit movement. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Buddha Sangh Premi, *Barristor Dr. Ambedkar (Hindi)* (New Delhi: *Panchchsheel Lok Sahitya Prakshan*, 1979), p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. *Times of India,* December 22, 1959, p. 11. ProQuest: Historical Newspaper. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Kanshiram, *The Chamcha Age: An Era of the Stooges* (New Delhi: Siddhartha publications, 2015), ii. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *Bahujan Sangthak*, 3 October 1971. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Prem Lata Gautam, Buddha Mahila Geet Manjari (Hindi) (New Delhi: Panchsheel Lok Sahitya Prakashan, 1974), p. 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Personal Interview with Mr. Inderbali in Ashok Vihar, Wazirabad, New Delhi (6 February 2021). Inderbali is an activist of BSP. He was part of the the *Jagriti jatha*, started by the Kanshiram(founder of Bahujan Samaj Party). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)