Research Article

Negotiating Boundaries Between "Religious" and "Secular": A Struggle for the Sense of Collectivity Among Ambedkarite Buddhists in Maharashtra

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Since the first mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism in 1956, followers of B. R. Ambedkar's vision have propagated Buddhism throughout India, creating various activist networks across, but not limited to, Maharashtra. Despite their aspirations for socio-political change and emancipation for marginalized communities experiencing caste discrimination, Ambedkarite Buddhists have faced challenges in mobilization and organization since the demise of Ambedkar. This article addresses the struggle of building a sense of collectivity within the Ambedkarite Buddhist population, offering insights from the perspective of young Ambedkarite Buddhists in Mumbai. The ethnographic study primarily focuses on interpreting the Ambedkarite Buddhist tradition and its position within the broader Buddhist framework and delves into the divergence in efforts to emplace Buddhism on the "religious-secular" spectrum among practitioners. The article aims to provide an interpretation of the challenges faced by the Ambedkarite Buddhists in pursuing a unified front for effecting social change in contemporary India.

Keywords: Ambedkarite Buddhists; Maharashtra; Dalit communities; B.R. Ambedkar; caste; groupness; collectivity; religion; modernity

THe unification and mobilization of various Dalit activist networks under one movement has been an ambition of numerous individuals and groups throughout the recent history of Dalit emancipation. The efforts to overcome challenges with mobilization of the communities, as well as the fragmentation among Dalit and Bahujan activists as they strive to confront caste-based discrimination and instigate transformative social and cultural shifts within society, have been a continuous topic of discussion among both scholars and activists in India and abroad (Teltumbde 2017; Waghmore 2017).[1] According to Guha (2022), referencing Gramsci's perspective on subaltern groups, it is apparent that social fragmentation is intricately woven into the historical and social fabric of the hegemonic order, consequently shaped by power dynamics in relation to the Indian ruling classes. Nonetheless, despite the possibility of the historically-ingrained character of contemporary fragmentation, subaltern communities continue to systematically draw upon the legacies of prominent leading figures like B. R. Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule, and Kanshi Ram, using them as catalysts for both sustaining existing anti-caste social movements and potentially fostering new ones across India.

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[1] The Marathi term *dalita* referes to a broad category encompassing hundreds of castes across India and was widely popularized by the Dalit Panthers as a concept including "members of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), the landless laborers, poor peasants, women and all those who were exploited politically, economically, and in the name of religion" (Omvedt 2006: 72). In this article, I use the term only for the population understood by the Indian government as members of the Scheduled Castes (SCs), which is the most common perception of the term in Maharashtra. The term *Bahujan* is translated from Pali as "the majority" and is used for addressing population of the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), as well as several other religious minorities and disadvantaged communities. It was promoted by social and political reformer Kanshi Ram as a political category for the larger masses. However, both two terms can be used and understood in different connotations regarding the geographical, cultural or political context.

In this study, my aim is to explore the dynamics of a group-formation and possible fragmentation among subaltern communities by looking at the specific case of contemporary Ambedkarite Buddhists in Maharashtra, as one of the most visible and influential of all modern subaltern movements.[2] To capture how the Ambedkarite Buddhist collectivity may form and which attributes are used as foundations for building a shared sense of groupness, I focus specifically on their interpretations of Buddhism and self-identification as Buddhists-Dalits-Ambedkarites in relation to their affiliations based on caste. Employing ethnographic research in the environment of young university-educated Ambedkarites who live in Mumbai and are socially or politically active, I analyze tensions between discourses and everyday practices and the consequences of their actions aiming to bring about social change and mobilize other Dalit and Bahujan communities.

To apprehend Ambedkarites' interpretations of Buddhism, I focus mainly on their perceptions of the symbols of authority in Ambedkarite Buddhism (Ambedkar and the Buddha), practices related to the tradition (acts of respect and worship, participation in activism), and how they affect interactions within the community. As fragmentation of a sense of collectivity is often indicated by subtle conflicts, a major area of research interest lies in the analysis of how in-group and out-group boundaries among Ambedkarite Buddhists are negotiated in everyday interactions. The analysis focuses on interviews and observations of interactions between Buddhists (and their surroundings) and their interactions with visual images and material objects.

The context of the topic lies within the historical roots of the Dalit Buddhist movement, which is intricately associated with the prominent figure of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit social reformer and one of the architects of the Indian constitution. Ambedkar's emancipatory strategies for the former Untouchable communities can be simplified into two major parts of his work: firstly, he sought to secure a distinct political representation for the marginalized, and secondly, he argued for the need for a departure from Hinduism, which he perceived as the bedrock of caste-based discrimination (Jaffrelot 2005: 51). To address the latter, Ambedkar publicly renounced Hinduism and embraced Buddhism on the 14th of October 1956, in Nagpur, where over 400,000 Dalits followed his example. The consequence of these mass conversions was a surge in the number of Buddhist communities in India, increasing by over 1670 percent within the subsequent five years (Zelliot 1966: 191). Embracing Buddhism (and other religious denominations before and after) became understood as a socio-political act of protest, symbolizing a step towards liberating oneself from the pervasiveness of caste.[3]

Following Dr. Ambedkar's passing in 1956, the Buddhist communities found themselves without a singular leader or sangha (Zelliot 2005: 73, 223), and the difficulties of finding leadership remain in some communities to this day (see Bradley and Bhatewara 2013: 206–7).[4] Although the rate of mass conversion subsided over the years, the number of converts still grows all the more that conversion is no longer penalized by loss of benefits for Dalit converts (Tartakov 2003: 193). The base of Buddhist communities, nevertheless, still remains in Maharashtra, a state of residence for 77 percent of all Buddhists in India (according to the Census in 2011). Here 95 percent of Buddhist communities with affiliation to Scheduled Castes are registered under the caste of Mahar (in 2011)—the same caste of origin as B. R. Ambedkar. This demographic composition serves as a rationale for the selection of Maharashtra as the main area for my field research.

[2] I chose the term Ambedkarite Buddhists after difficulties with addressing participants as Neo-Buddhists or Dalit Buddhists (more in Zelliot 2005: 233). Moreover, the term Ambedkarite Buddhists (Navayana Buddhists or simply Buddhists) corresponds with the self-presentation of the participants; thus, by this decision, I am trying to avoid the imposition of an unfavorable classification. When referring to Buddhists in Maharashtra, I always mean the community of former "Untouchables" who converted to Buddhism. Ambedkarite refers in this case to socio-political affiliation to the figure and legacy of B. R. Ambedkar.

[3] The means to resist caste oppression included, for example, Jyotirao Phule's theism and *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma*, Ramasami Periyar's atheism, Saivism in the Tamil Nadu area, new religious traditions initiated by Narayanswami Guru and Ayyapan (Omvedt 1994, 2004, 2008), bhakti traditions (Bellwinkel-Schempp 2007; Keune 2021), and conversions to Christianity and Islam (Kim 2005; Robinson and Clarke 2003).

[4] Organizations having huge influence on today's Ambedkarite Buddhist communities in Maharashtra are mainly Bhāratiya Bauddha Mahāsabha organization (The Buddhist Society of India) founded by Ambedkar in 1955 and Triratna Bauddha Mahāsaṅgha (Triratna Buddhist Community).

Methods and Materials

The field research took place in the city of Mumbai and in the countryside of Maharashtra during the Fall of 2017. The data was further supplemented with information from online and in-person discussions with Ambedkarite students from 2018 to 2020. The specific details of places and interviewees are anonymized.[5] The analysis draws on participant observation, field notes, numerous informal debates with students from Dalit backgrounds at the university campuses for a period of two months, five narrative and semi-structured interviews with Ambedkarite Buddhists in Mumbai (four men and one woman), two group interviews recorded during a debate in a Buddhist Ambedkar temple in Mumbai, and two debates in villages situated in the Kolhapur district on the topic of caste resistance.[6] The interviews were in English; some parts of the debates in rural areas were in Marathi and simultaneously translated into English. The field research was also accompanied by conversations with several senior members of the activist and academic base formed around caste issues.[7]

The interviews focused on participants' narrative life stories (Bold 2012) interlaced with references to caste and Buddhism. Three out of four interviewees had histories connected to the Mahar caste and one to the Matang caste, coming originally from rural parts of central and southern Maharashtra. Mahars, along with Chamars, are one of the largest and most prominent communities belonging to Scheduled Castes (SCs) in the state, experiencing higher social and economic mobility than other SCs (Jodhka 2018: 183), and were one of the first communities to mobilize and demand civic and human rights in the past (Rao 2009: 14).[8] The interviewees were Buddhists between 20 and 40 years of age living in Mumbai, either university students or university-educated, and had participated in social or political activism.[9] Many Indian universities in recent years have given rise to student initiatives aiming to address caste-based discrimination and democracy in Indian institutions. Aroused by the suicide of a doctoral student, Rohith Vemula, in 2016 (often referred to as an institutional murder by students and activists), the activism of Dalit-Bahujan students became more visible and articulated towards challenging institutionalized discrimination inside as well as outside of the university space (Sukumar 2016; Thirumal and Christy 2018). Through various protests often emerging in big Indian cities, students draw on the legacy of prominent social activists such as B. R. Ambedkar, Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule or Birsa Munda while significantly contributing to new types of mobilization strategies, implementations – and imaginations – of transformative politics on campuses (Pathania 2020; Kumar 2022; Mahananda 2023). With the start of the research in 2017, awareness of the protests and the prominent role of Ambedkarite student organizations at the universities were an integral part of the student narratives in the interviews.

To address the dynamics of group-making and explore the sense of collectivity among Ambedkarite Buddhists, I propose to use the concept of groupness as defined by Rogers Brubaker in his book *Ethnicity without Groups* (2004). Brubaker argues that the notion of the group as a homogeneous unit full of collective actors pursuing

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[5] Two interviewees asked for the anonymization of their names due to the concern that their replies might influence their position at work/university. Three other interviewees expressed their indifference to anonymization with the reply "I have nothing to hide" or "I am not afraid." For this reason, all the names of the interviewees (as well as other Ambedkarite Buddhists) have been replaced by nicknames (specifically Abhaya, Munesh, Raahul, Swajay, and Varaj). Only verbal informed consent to participate was obtained due to students' concerns over anonymity.

[6] Several students rejected the possibility of recorded interviews due to their concerns over their safety. They agreed only to informal discussions and sharing of their experiences of caste discrimination, Ambedkarism, and conversion to Buddhism.

[7] Namely I would like to thank Gail Omvedt, Bharat Patankar, Avatti Ramaiah, Sachin Garud, Rajeshwari Deshpande, and Somnath Waghmare, as well as to Jon Keune, Dusan Deak, Johannes Beltz, and Martin Fuchs to all of whom I owe many profound suggestions and insights.

[8] I use the term Scheduled Castes (SCs) while refering either to the discourse within state organizations/university institutions which use the category for their inner classifications or when adressing issues of communities that disagree with being called Dalits and prefer to be understood under the official category SCs (see more for example in Jodhka 2018: 183).

[9] None of the interviewees felt officially part of any of the Ambedkarite or Buddhist organisations, although they had friendly links within them and sometimes participated in their activities – Buddhist retreats and schools, processions and demonstrations, etc.

common goals is taken for granted in many studies and generally reduces the researcher's ability to analyze group formation processes. Groups continue to be understood as actors, which Brubaker considers to be a very reductive and overgeneralizing approach that leads to vague definitions of intergroup conflicts as ethnic, racial, religious, or national (2004: 7–9). Following Brubaker's approach, I use the concept of groupness as an analytic category that focuses on 1) grasping the dynamics of forming a shared sense or experience of belonging and 2) sharing aspects of cultural meanings, practices, and interpretations. Groupness, therefore, implies the forming of a social cohesion that binds individuals together as a distinct social entity with a sense of belonging and recognition among the members. Treating the category as a "contextually fluctuating conceptual variable," (2004: 11) I aim to explore the interactive and mutually-oriented sense of collectivity, which may arise in some contexts but fail to emerge in others. These dynamics may relate to interpretations of practices, symbols, values, norms, physical objects, institutions, and historical memories among actors. It is the tensions showing boundaries of the overlapping sense of groupness within interactions that are the main targets of discursive analysis in interviews and discussions.

For research purposes, I focus on tensions and negotiated boundaries between the usage of three main categories representing different identifications in the community – Buddhists, Dalits, and Ambedkarites – and their relations to caste affiliation (whether in the form of groupness emerging around one's caste/family name or the broader category of Scheduled Castes). I consciously avoid treating these categories as collective identities because this concept may suggest a notion of "sameness" and permanence, even though it is often used for the description of highly relational phenomena (more in Brubaker and Cooper 2000). While the three identification categories share some common characteristics, such as linkage to resistance to domination within caste power relations, their meaning is often highly socially, culturally, and environmentally contextual in interactions. The next section is dedicated to the exploration of the dynamics in various contexts while the actors relate to and use the identification categories to negotiate in-group and out-group relations.

Dalit-Buddhist-Ambedkarite: A Passage Between Past and Present

The Dalit struggle for equality is permeated with contestations over the characteristics of Dalit-hood and caste affiliation both in terms of institutions and self-identification within their social contexts. On the one hand, these communities have been called by terms such as the Untouchables and Gandhi's epithet Harijans —categories perceived negatively by the communities, or, on the other hand, as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Depressed Classes—terms imbued by others for administrative and political purposes. The commonly accepted Marathi term Dalits, which Eleanor Zelliot translates as "downtrodden" (2005: 290) and has popularity in the region due to the Dalit Panthers and Dalit poetry movement, has been claimed by several Ambedkarites during our debates but not without a certain hesitation. As numerous authors point out, even though the usage of self-presentation of communities as Dalits is generally connected to an endeavour toward self-determination, unification, and mobilization of all the oppressed and discriminated people in India, the meaning of the concept, its understanding, and usage considerably differ among various communities (Guru 2001; Beltz 2005; Gorringe 2005; Paik 2011). As Anupama Rao points out, after Indian independence, the Dalit category became a ground for discussions and reformulations of the relationship between modernity and democracy in India, and the topic of Dalit emancipation became inseparable from the question of India's political relations (Rao 2009). Therefore, the sense of groupness forming around the term Dalit may serve many marginalized communities as an inherently political claim used with pride for mobilization and unification of different communities experiencing discrimination. However, as the recent study of Dalit activists in New Delhi indicates, some hesitate to use the term Dalit for either perceived negativity and connection to caste identification or for being an inclusive category only for selected Dalit castes such as

Mahars, Chamars, and Jatavs (Jodhka 2018: 182–83). The ambiguity around this term can also be illustrated by the recommendation of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment in 2018 to not use the nomenclature "Harijans," "Girijans," and "Dalits" in State Government Administration and limit the formal discourse only to the term "Scheduled Castes"(Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment 2018).

In everyday interactions around Mumbai, young Ambedkarite Buddhists and students used the term Dalit as a connection to their heritage and the history of caste atrocities—mostly in the form of previous affiliation with *jati* (among the most represented castes in Maharashtra are Mahars, Chamars, and Matangs). Collective memories of caste atrocities committed on their ancestors, as well as the knowledge of ongoing caste-based exploitation, created a strong sense of a shared past even though only very few of the young Ambedkarites experienced violent atrocities firsthand. In this context, young Ambedkarites mentioned that the discrimination they have experienced manifested mostly in failed inter-caste love relationships, decline of services, invitations to social events, job opportunities, and handshakes, and also in the form of insults and other verbal attacks in the educational environment. The notion of shared injustice has served in their agitation narratives as a significant unifying force and a group-forming aspect pervading socio-economic classes and geographic locations. However, the adoption of the Dalit (or Bahujan) terminology for self-identification was primarily confined to discussions concerning family traditions, educational experiences, and forms of activism directly linked to addressing caste-based violence and discrimination. While talking about their present situation and future directions, most of the young Ambedkarite Buddhists avoided self-identifying as part of the Dalit community. They would rather choose the label of Ambedkarite, Buddhist, or both to describe their position within society. Caste names were used by Buddhists only in reference to the past, challenges of administrative classifications, or in efforts to delimit themselves from members of other castes (being "ex-Mahars," "ex-Chamars," "ex-Matangs").

The issue of maintaining a cohesive transition between positioning oneself as being part of different group-formations in the past and present arose especially during negotiating the in-group and out-group boundaries in public space. One type of situation was when newspapers, social media, or university institutions reported on students' work (which often tended towards anti-caste activism) as Bahujan, Dalit, or Mahar/Chamar activity. In my ethnographic research, such situations often triggered a strong student reaction followed by delimitation of themselves from any caste identification, demanding to be called Buddhist or Ambedkarite authors/students. Johannes Beltz (2004) and Shailaja Paik (2011) also point to this tension, linking it to educated middle-class members of SCs who feel the term Dalit has a negative connotation because it does not take into account the implications of their conversion to Buddhism (2004: 258; 2011: 229). Abhaya, an Ambedkarite Buddhist working in Mumbai, expressed this tension by clearly separating Dalit-hood from a conversion-bound identification through Buddhism:

> When you convert to Buddhism, you are not a Dalit anymore in a sense, you are a Buddhist because it gives you the spiritual space where you can be what you are, you can think, you are equal. Buddhism gives you space where you can uplift yourself, you can question. Always.

In personal conversations and on social media and Internet forums, the controversy about whether to label oneself as Dalit or exclusively as Buddhist was ever-present. The term Dalit for many Buddhists serves in this context as a synonym for "living in caste", which is incompatible with "living in Buddhism". The relevance of this controversy was indicated also in the number of articles addressing the matter of Dalit-hood in relation to the Ambedkarite movement stirred in 2018 by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment order.[10] Thus, for some Buddhists, the issue has emerged as important during the debates and interactions with other

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[10] For example, texts on blog and news platforms: Round Table India – *Delete the Dalit?* (2018); *The word 'Dalit', Appropriate or Not* (2018) – and the Wire – *To Be or Not to Be a 'Dalit'* (2018)?

students and Ambedkarites and created tensions and efforts to negotiate the boundaries of Dalit, Buddhist, as well as Ambedkarite categories.

The tension over whether the category of Dalit should be considered pejorative and incompatible with being a Buddhist is also deeply embedded in the governmental affirmative action or "reservation" system. Since 1990, the Buddhist community in India has had the right to access the reservation system in employment and education under the Constitution (Scheduled Caste) Orders (Amendment Act). Until then, many converts often retained their caste affiliation for pragmatic reasons—to access the benefits of the reservation system—and were not institutionally recognized as Buddhists. Raahul, an Ambedkarite Buddhist whose father converted to Buddhism during the 1960s, considered this institutional watershed to be the reason why his ancestors' conversion was only symbolic:

> ...till then [The Amendment Act] everyone had in their birth certificate Hindu Mahar, so whoever converted in 1956, they converted symbolically, they embraced Buddhism symbolically.

Institutional barriers to recognition as Buddhists without caste have often been mentioned when talking about the need to eradicate the so-called "caste mentality." Several young Buddhist students have complained about the university's requirement to produce a document proving that they are from a Scheduled Caste community in order to receive reservation benefits. For them, it was a humiliating action to assert their Dalit-hood that they felt was cancelled by being a Buddhist. However, reservations are sometimes the only means to get into university or acquire a better job, as most Dalits still live with the effects of long-term historical systemic marginalization. These practices seemed to deepen the disparity in their efforts to leave behind the Dalit-hood of the past and embrace Buddhism as a publicly accepted and asserted status of the present and the future.

The struggle to be recognized as Buddhists and not as Dalits (or Scheduled Caste members) took place not only at the external level of institutions and the public but also in relationships within the community itself. Swajay, a young Buddhist who converted from the Matang caste to Buddhism over the objections of his family, expressed frustration at how pressure within the Buddhist community divided converts according to their original caste. According to his experience, the conversion, motivated by "getting out of the system," had only a small effect on how other people approached him:

> Even after the conversion, many people haven't accepted me as a Buddhist. They still see me as a Dalit coming from this or that caste. The conversion happened only on paper. Other people still see me as a Dalit; their attitude hasn't changed a bit. ... There is still Buddhist-Mahar, Buddhist-Matang [in the Buddhist community], I don't know how we're going to eradicate this.

The classification of "Buddhist-Mahar" or "Buddhist-Matang" is seen among many Buddhists as a contradiction and a backward step in bringing social change, although this type of naming is widely used in common speech among themselves as well as outside the community. The effect of differentiation of Buddhists based on their former caste affiliation leads, in some cases among ex-Matangs, to a sense of alienation from a Buddhist community consisting mostly of converts from the Mahar caste (Paik 2011: 234–35). In general, the tensions around the category of Dalit-hood seem to be a symptom of the negotiation of the issue of how to relate to the past associated with caste. The effort to detach themselves completely from caste identification through language subsequently makes it difficult for some young Ambedkarites to talk about their experience as an integral part of the history of caste discrimination.

Being Buddhist is by no means the only group-forming mode among converted Dalits. When I was discussing the title of the paper with one of my Buddhist friends, he insisted on adding the additional adjective of "Ambedkarite." The proud association with social reformer B. R. Ambedkar serves among many Dalits as an

ultimate general category that includes all, regardless of caste and religion. It carries an unspoken rejection of the caste system and, in many cases, an admitted aspiration to implement the ideals of Ambedkar that will bring about social change in society. Specifically, Ambedkar's writings are part of a lively negotiation among Ambedkarites about the legitimacy of their arguments, approaches to activism, and the production of their own works. The emphasis on a complete and truthful interpretation of Ambedkar's ideas became part of regular discussions in which one particular issue came up very often: the importance of conversion in the struggle against caste.

During my discussions in 2020 with Varaj, an Ambedkarite Buddhist student at one of the universities in Mumbai (the name of the university was anonymized), the question of conversion and Hindu religiosity among Ambedkarites has been seen as an issue:

> Ambedkarites, who are not Buddhists [have not converted], sometimes continue to worship Hindu gods and goddesses. That is not a problem from the perspective of Buddhism—to be tolerant of other people's faiths. But it is a problem from the Ambedkarites' perspective because Ambedkar literally told that Buddhism is the right way and people shouldn't continue worshiping Hindu gods. According to Ambedkarite Buddhists this is unacceptable, to pick some of the teaching of Ambedkar according to what suits me. So, they don't want to cooperate with other Ambedkarites who are still worshipping Hindus.

This reflection arose in the context of who is the "real Ambedkarite" and Buddhist. According to Varaj, the reluctance to cooperate with non-Buddhist Ambedkarites is very real and creates a division in resistance efforts that is harmful to the emancipation goals of Ambedkarites. In his case, despite being aware of this divisive danger, he himself would be reluctant to participate in joint activities with non-Buddhist Ambedkarite activist groups due to differences in understanding the importance of Buddhism for the emancipation of Dalits. This issue is also being addressed on social media and in the writings of Ambedkarites who causally link Buddhism and Ambedkarism, claiming: "Good you tweeted about Buddha otherwise you will not be considered as Ambedkarite"; or "You can not (sic) claim to be Ambedkarite if you are discouraging the movement of Buddhism" (in Bhaware 2020).

The controversy of so-called "picking" out parts of Ambedkar's teaching was also put into the context of the Buddhists' rejection of a positive reinterpretation of Dalit-hood as a proud identification with the history of resistance. The reinterpretation of the Dalit-hood and caste in a positive sense related to self-assertion and emancipation is seen in many cases all over India (see Beltz 2004: 258–61). In their resistance against caste-based discrimination, Dalit communities try to reformulate and transform the meanings of cultural practices and objects which were perceived as symbols of their so-called "low origin." An example of this is the usage of the *parai* drum made from cow skin in public performances by activists despite the drum being considered polluting by members of other castes (Hons 2018; Gorringe 2016; Sherinian 2014). This reinterpretation of Dalit-hood, coupled with pride in one's own tradition and history, is one of the strategies for the emancipation of Dalit communities. In many cases, this strategy stands in a very ambivalent relation toward post-conversion strategies. In some Dalit Christian communities, Dalit-hood and its reinterpretation are part of the post-conversion life, but the degree to which converts blend Dalit-hood with forming identification around being a Christian varies from parish to parish, person to person (Robinson and Kujur 2010). Lucinda Ramberg (2016) connects these dissonances to negotiations over one's position in time and with Dalit temporalities of the past and future. In her work, she uses an example of Milind Wakankar's (2010) argument about the weaver-poet Kabir and Dalit conversions. According to Wakankar, Kabir—being a convert and a Dalit at the same time—was someone outside the strict identification boundaries with position remaining "forever in-between" (2010: 51). Ramberg noted this temporality among Ambedkarite Buddhists,

while at the same time observing a strong rejection of "in-between" temporality by Ambedkarite intellectuals as something that can trap them in the past (2016: 241). Different approaches to this blending "in-between" temporality, as Varaj's arguments have shown, may act as a divisive force within activist movements. To delve deeper into this issue, it is necessary to address the question of group-formation boundaries, the possible reasons behind the rejection of blending in the context of Ambedkarite Buddhism, and Ambedkarites' own various interpretations of Buddhism.

The Line Between Respect and Worship in the Drive for Modernity

The mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism in Nagpur in 1956 is sometimes referred to as a revival of the Buddhist tradition in India (Tartakov 2003). The population identifying themselves as Buddhists increased from 180,828 in the 1950s (Census 1951) to over 3.2 million in the 1960s (Census 1961). This new branch of Buddhism, introduced by Ambedkar in his book *Buddha and his Dhamma*, is sometimes called (especially outside the community) the new path, Neo-Buddhism or a *Navayana*. And while it draws on certain elements of already established traditions of Buddhism, Ambedkar's reinterpretation was quite extensive. By embracing Buddhism, Dalits had to refute old customs in Hindu traditions and take 22 wows personally prescribed by Ambedkar. They included, among other things, refusing to worship Hindu deities and participating in rituals performed by Brahmins. The vows, in their generality, pursued the goal of publicly renouncing the "Hindu religion" perceived by Ambedkar as the main obstacle to human emancipation (Tartakov 2003: 196). The ritually-articulated mode of conversion and renunciation of the past way of life was seen by Ambedkar as essential for the further emancipation of Dalit communities. For in Ambedkar's perspective, Brahminism, Hinduism, and the caste hierarchy were directly and causally linked to each other (Ambedkar 2016: 3.13).

The choice of conversion as a tool of socio-political protest against Brahminism and caste hierarchy brought into sharp relief the Hindu religion, which Ambedkar considered to be the root of caste. In his undelivered speech *The Annihilation of Caste* (2016) in 1936, Ambedkar presented a view that it is necessary "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" (Ambedkar 2016: 20.12).[11] Embracing Buddhism was meant to be a practical solution for Dalit communities, leading them to emancipation, empowerment, and construction of a new safe area of self-identification beyond the boundaries of caste. Ambedkar's argument for choosing Buddhism came (among others) from his understanding of Buddhism as a socially-oriented moral and rational philosophy dedicated to opposing Brahminism in India from its early beginnings (Omvedt 2003).

In Ambedkar's world, Buddhism had the right combination of ethical and rational conditions for compatibility with the modern views of society and, therefore, could serve as a "solution for the reconstruction of the world" (Beltz 2004: 7–8). Ambedkar represented this reconstruction as a shift from the hierarchy of caste toward what he saw as a modern democratic society based on social equality (Tartakov 2003: 198). In this shift, the Hindu religion represents "an antique stage of civilized society," which has not passed through the revolution of secularization and modernity (Omvedt 2004: 56–57).

The reconstruction and reinterpretation of Buddhism as a social revolution became the basis for the Ambedkarite intellectual understanding of Buddhist tradition. However, Ambedkar's reinterpretation of Buddhism, at least in terms of the interpretation of Buddhist scriptures, was markedly different from many schools of the Mahayana or Theravada tradition. Among the most significant changes were the relegation of the *Four Noble Truths* to the background of attention, a reassessment of the role of *bhikkhus* (monks) and the *sangha*, and putting the concept of *dukkha* (sorrow) into the context of the socio-political practices of untouchability (more in Fiske and Emmrich 2004). The image of Buddhism as a modern and evolving

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[11] The term Hindu religion is not used here as an analytical term, only in the sense of its use by B. R. Ambedkar.

philosophy appeared quite often during the interviews with young Ambedkarites. According to Buddhist student Abhaya, "[w]hen Ambedkar converted to Buddhism, he understood the illness of Hinduism, like over time the religion has to evolve". She argued later in the interview that the Hindu religion had not evolved over time (like Buddhism and Christianity), and therefore, it has no place in the Indian present or future. Another Buddhist Ambedkarite, Munesh, compared the conversion to Buddhism to updating software. When people come across a better version of the software, they should adopt it. Otherwise, they "will be left behind".

As Gail Omvedt (2006) implies, the presentation of "Buddhism as an advanced, egalitarian and rational mode" (2006: 49–50) was a key concept for Ambedkar's effort to unify the resistance against Brahminism and shatter the image of Hindus as a progressive majority in India. This interpretation of Buddhism as an intellectual tradition that is distant from institutional religion and relies more on individual rational choices is close to the romanticized image of Buddhism that was very popular in the West at the time of Ambedkar's studies in Europe and America. From the nineteenth to early twentieth century, the path of Buddhism into Western society began mostly through the interpretations of Orientalists and Theosophists, who portrayed Buddhism as a "science of mind" and a " 'true' modern religion" (Baumann 2012: 117–18). Reshaping Buddhism into a rational and moral philosophy of the East served as a critique of Christian values and, according to Martin Baumann, was also meant as an impulse for reform in Europe (2012: 121).[12] In this sense, Ambedkar's Buddhism is strongly linked to the discourse on modernity with its underlying tension between "traditional" sectors of society and the centrality of protest. Being driven by shaping patterns of in-group and out-group relations and competition over legitimacy and reconstruction within the social and cultural fields, the struggle over its boundaries is everlasting. In the case of Buddhism, this contestation of boundaries is also manifested in the case of the relationship between secularism and religion, as Ambedkar openly set Buddhism in conflict with Brahmanism and Hindu religiosity. However, this conception of Buddhism does not neatly fit with the complex lived reality of many Ambedkarites.

During interviews and observations, tensions arose among Buddhists about whether it is appropriate not only to pay respect to Ambedkar and Buddha but also to perform devotional and worshipful acts towards them. University-educated Buddhists tried to demarcate themselves from other Buddhists who pray in temples to statues and images of Ambedkar and Buddha and perform pujas devoted to them at home. Buddhist Raahul, for example, expressed his disapproval of worship practices toward Ambedkar that happen regularly in the local viharas (meeting halls for the community) in Mumbai:

> Even Ambedkar, they believe he is a God. They have temples and everything, there are viharas, every Sunday morning people gather there at eleven o'clock, they say a prayer and go back home. Now I don't understand how the singing of prayer is going to help them.

According to him, worship practices are one of the reasons why Buddhist movements in India are "going backward." Another example of this tension occurred during my meeting with young people in a village near Kolhapur. When asked about their perception of Ambedkar, whose images hung on all the walls of Buddhist houses, they replied that he was God to them. They repeated this answer several times during the meeting. Anzan, a university-educated Ambedkarite Buddhist who organized the meeting and translated the communication, later expressed disagreement with the way Ambedkar was described at the meeting. From his point of view, it was a common but entirely inappropriate belief. However, he was convinced that the

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[12] At this time, Ambedkar underwent his university education at Columbia University in New York City and at the London School of Economics between 1913 to 1923. It is not unreasonable to assume, that along with the influence of pragmatism from John Dewey (Stroud 2017), Ambedkar's understanding of Buddhism might be affected by the romanticized portrayal of Buddhism in the West as a modern ideal of life in self-cultivation, rationalism, and demythologization.

Buddhists we met were aware that Ambedkar shouldn't be treated as a deity. According to him, the word "God" mainly expressed the degree of devotion and respect some Buddhists feel towards Ambedkar.

These narratives are not unusual among Buddhists, especially in rural parts of India. Indira Y. Junghare (1988), in her study of folk songs performed by Buddhists in villages, noticed that the figures of Ambedkar and Buddha were portrayed both as heroes and deities (1988: 100–104). It is important to note that her research also demonstrates that Ambedkar's image in the songs of Buddhists is quite variable—from a common man to the supreme deity.[13] A similar conclusion is reached by Gopal Guru (2010). He establishes three major categories of understanding Ambedkar among Dalits as 1) Maha Manav, 2) the messiah, and 3) a perfect modernist. The Maha Manav represents a Great Man with extraordinary, even supernatural qualities "beyond the reach of almost everyone else." No one can match him in the past or in the future. Ambedkar as a messiah is a reference to worshipping Ambedkar (and Buddha) as a part of the Hindu pantheon or as an exclusive deity of Navayana Buddhism. According to Guru, this portrayal of Ambedkar relieving the Dalits' pain and granting them wealth and success is not very common. Most Buddhists and Dalits share the narrative of Ambedkar as "a perfect modernist"—a scholar with moral and social commitment toward oppressed minorities—an image appealing to young people constructed to motivate them toward Ambedkar's visions (2010: 207–11).

There is also another form of devotional practice within Buddhist communities related to Maha Manav imagination, which Guru's text does not specifically address, and that is to revere Ambedkar as a bodhisattva, exemplifying deep respect and reverence within the Buddhist tradition. Designating Ambedkar as a bodhisattva, in some cases directly as Maitreya (Tartakov 2010: 181), includes a range of devotional practices and approaches varying from using the term in a very broad meaning close to a common designation of Ambedkar as Babasaheb (honorific title "respected father"), to others indicating the highest reverence associated with Buddhist rites and traditions. The latter is visible, for example, in the work of the Triratna Buddhist Community (more information about the Triratna's Buddhist *pujas* and rituals in Hennigar 2022), but also in some public places such as the new Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Memorial Bhavan in Navi Mumbai from 2021, which refers to Ambedkar's death as a *Mahāparinibbāṇa*.

In my research, patterns emerged in which young, educated Buddhists mostly referred to Ambedkar in the university environment as a modernist and a scholar with unique visions worthy of following. In contrast, during discussions in Buddha viharas or in social media groups, Ambedkar tends to be portrayed as Maha Manav (in the Buddhist environment as a bodhisattva) but only very rarely as a messiah or deva. The perception of Ambedkar as a Maha Manav who cannot be overcome and whose place cannot be filled with other leaders was evident in many conversations. Ambedkarite Buddhist Raahul looked back during the interview at the time of Ambedkar's death with these words:

> But all of the sudden he died on the 6th of December and his followers who were in right, left, center, they started to fight over who is gonna fill the vacuum. It is you, me or her. ... And no one was ready or so good to be a new Ambedkar so anyone was trying to fit into his shoes and it was not possible. And there arouse the big problem, who will fit into his shoes? ... So, it happened that he went his way [he died], he went his way, and it all came to fractions. And since then they [Ambedkarite Buddhists] are not united on the point of Ambedkarism, on point of ideology, equality, fraternity, being humans, following the constitution —there are so many small fractions.

Raahul's point of view illustrates the frustrations of many young people with the current situation in Ambedkarite communities and its public image. Viewing Ambedkar as Maha Manav whose "leadership shoes" cannot be filled by someone else and whose legacy is unquestionable could reinforce the charismatic

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[13] It is also likely that this representation of Ambedkar is related to the form of the traditional songs – *Ambedkari jalsa* and *abhangas* – devotional songs related to bhakti traditions in Maharashtra.

authority (as formulated by Max Weber) through which Ambedkar is perceived by many of his followers and to whom they should give their love, respect, and gratitude.

Tensions within the communities that I focused on in understanding the figure of Ambedkar as the main domain for shaping a sense of groupness among Buddhists were primarily concerned with the boundaries between expressions of love and respect on one hand and devotion or worship on the other. The two portrayals of Ambedkar as a modernist and Maha Manav are commonly perceived by Buddhists as standard displays of respect. The tension becomes visible only when the display of respect seems to extend into the realm of worship, and the boundary there is often blurry, negotiated in specific interactions and contexts. For example, while many young Buddhists would proudly have a photo of Ambedkar with a picture of Buddha at their home with flowers or at the little home altar, many considered individual puja or meditation (as often practised in the Triratna and Vipassana viharas) towards home altars as unnecessary ritualism that was rejected by Ambedkar (more about ritualism from the point of the community itself in darokar et al. 2022: 55–59). At first sight, this tension seems almost artificial and, at the same time, highly intellectualized, with its core in setting the boundaries of meaning in the ordinary activities of Ambedkarites, categorizing complex patterns of behaviour into distinctive domains of social order. However, from the observation, especially in the setting where the worlds of lived Ambedkarism have the possibility to merge (such as multi-generational family meetings and public ritual gatherings), the implications of the tension are very real, varying from little conflicts at the micro-level of relationships to the unwillingness to cooperate on the level of organizations/activists.

The perception of showing respect on the one hand and practicing worship on the other as two opposite sides of a secular-religious perspective seem to be one of the reasons for the current fragmentation of Dalit and Buddhist collectivity. Debates, often framed by the frustration of Ambedkarites with the current social and political situation, intensified their need for a clear-cut boundary between the "right" and "wrong" practices, and the common features of these practices were sometimes overlooked. In all their variations, they are still overlapping displays of emotive attachment embedded in the cultural background of the actors, often crucial for the local understanding of community life. The rituals and customs around which a sense of collective action and belonging are formed are the backbone of community life across India, and their radical redefinition or removal can lead to a weakening of community and family ties. The intellectual perception of secularity as the absence of these communal rituals seems to stem from a desire among Ambedkarites to define themselves against the Hindu majority's external pressures and, above all, the earlier widespread perception of Dalit communities as "backward" or "not modern." This strive for fixed identification boundaries is then closely linked to the position of Ambedkarite Buddhism in India and its ambivalent relationship to the categories of the religious and the secular.

Distinguishing "Religious" and "Secular": "Being the Real Buddhist"

Discussions essentializing or, on the contrary, contextualizing practices and doctrines related to the teachings of Buddha that emerge in Ambedkar's writings have a long tradition ranging across centuries and regions. The conceptualization of Buddhism as a unifying framework encompassing diverse cultural worlds was predominantly formed as a theoretical construction during the nineteenth century. Its image was shaped by the interactions between Western scholars, orientalists, colonial agendas, and Asian Buddhist teachers and their students within the power relations existing in colonial British India (King 2011). Over the history of the term, Buddhism has been viewed and presented as an atheistic religion, rational and scientific religion, idolatry, and no religion at all. Being later established as a world religious tradition, Buddhism "has been embraced in the West as both an alternative religion and an alternative to religion" (Lopez 2005). Within these

classifying efforts, supported by the ideas of Western scholars, the consequent issue of binary categories of religion and secular appeared with an attempt to distinguish between the "modern" and the "traditional" societies. As Timothy Fitzgerald indicates, the attempt to fit the separate categories of religion, society, and politics into Indian everyday life and trying to view the caste institutions and Dalit experience through the religion-secular binary only deepen problems with understanding the complexity of the situation (not only) in India (Fitzgerald 2011: 52–60). And it is into this discursive field that Ambedkar and his introduction of Navayana Buddhism entered in the first half of the twentieth century.

As mentioned earlier, Ambedkar's Buddhism seems to bear the marks of a discursive struggle in the use of separate terms politics, social and religious, and the religion-secular binary while creating a cultural space separate from Hindu tradition. According to Martin Fuchs (2004), Ambedkar pushed the concept of religion to its rational limits and introduced one of the most rigorous concepts of religion for modernity (2004: 287). The construction of rational Buddhism for the masses of Dalit and Bahujan communities as a top-down solution to caste inequalities encountered obstacles related to the difficulty of leaving the folk and Hindu rituals and traditions behind. Lived Buddhism, therefore, often differs from the ideals of Ambedkar Buddhism, as some Ambedkarites continue practicing local traditions and family customs. Consequently, the question of Buddhism's relationship to religion remains unresolved among many Ambedkarites. This was clearly visible in the interviews and discussions with Buddhists in Mumbai. Each of the Buddhists held a different position with respect to whether Buddhism should be understood as a religion, spiritual development strategy, socio-political message, or secular philosophy, often using term *buddha (bauddha) dhamma* instead of Buddhism to relate to the tradition. These positions sometimes overlapped according to the topic and atmosphere of the debate. Usually, however, there was an effort to avoid associating Buddhism directly with anything religious, as Raahul's interpretation of Buddhism illustrates:

> I don't see Buddhism as my religion. I see Buddha as my hero from a different point of view. … Buddha, he is the philosophy of living, learning, being a good human being, and evolving every single day.

Dilemmas about how to understand the concept of religion also emerge from the struggle against Brahminism and Hinduization of Dalit culture. The Buddhist community in the past (and present) has not avoided the pressure from Hindu nationalists to conform to the image of a unified Hindu India [represented mainly by the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*—RSS and Shiv Sena; more in Jaffrelot (1999); Ludden (2005); Hansen and Jaffrelot (2001)]. The RSS targets Dalit communities, in particular, to bring them under its influence by reinterpreting their history and cultural traditions (Narayan 2021: 18–19). Such reinterpretation often takes the form of equating Ambedkar with Savarkar and Hedgewar, figures of the nationalist movement (Guru 1991), or portraying Ambedkar as an icon of the RSS political campaign that promotes his invocation in the context of Hindu festivities (Narayan 2021: 19). However, the most prominent practice of reinterpretation as it pertains to Buddhism is promoting Buddha as the ninth avatar of the god Vishnu, a practice also promoted by the RSS circles which pervades through all social and political spheres of Indian society.

Interpretation of Buddha as the incarnation of Vishnu has a long tradition in Brahminical and nationalist discourses (Holt 2004). Therefore, Ambedkar in his writings and speeches distanced himself very strictly from this practice, making it his fifth vow during public conversion (Jaffrelot 2005: 135). To this day, however, the discourse subsuming the Buddha under the Hindu pantheon appears in the public space and is perceived by the younger generation of Ambedkarites as an intensification of efforts to homogenize cultural space by nationalist groups. Munesh, a Buddhist based in Mumbai, used the interpretation of Buddha as an avatar of the god Vishnu as an illustration of the ongoing Hinduization of Buddhist culture, which, according to him, aims to reintegrate converted Dalits into the Hindu social order:

> Even today we are facing it [discrimination], so many times you can see, even today, even Buddha is the reincarnation of Lord Vishnu; they are again trying to put him under this thing … again and again they're trying to push us into the same system. Babasaheb made a lot of effort to pull us out from that bad system of caste and creeds and whatever. But still there are forces going on in our country [to put us back].

This statement reflects one of the reasons why young university-educated Buddhists reject practices which may be interpreted as acts of worship of Buddha and Ambedkar as deities. Acts of worship are seen to be closer to RSS practices and interpretations that many Buddhists want nothing to do with. Even more so, they addressed these practices as an effort to return to caste-based social positions—"being where we were in the past." Young Ambedkarite Buddhists viewed the "correct" understanding of Ambedkar's ideas and visions as crucial to resisting the pressure from the outside.

As mentioned earlier, Ambedkar's texts are an important source of inspiration and legitimacy that young Ambedkarite Buddhists frequently cite to support their own decisions and promote social change in their environment. They often read these texts in original English versions and quote passages from them in common parlance to strengthen their arguments.[14] From their perspective, all should read Ambedkar's texts to fully understand the Dalit situation and the role of Buddhism in the emancipation efforts. However, Ambedkar's writings derive much from intellectual English rather than from the languages of South Asia (Tartakov 2004: 152) and may be, therefore, less accessible to people with lower education despite their translations to languages of native speakers in India. This is all the more significant if discussions include intellectual debates about secularism, the perception of Buddhism as a religion or rational philosophy, and the implications of this approach for everyday life.

According to Fuchs (2004), "Ambedkar launched an attack against 'religion', putting Buddhism on a different plane," where Buddhist dhamma should become superior to religion (2004: 289). It is important to add that the research about Ambedkar is permeated by discussions about the meaning behind Ambedkar Buddhism, and what the categories such as dhamma, religion, spirituality, and philosophy in his writings really referred to (Queen 1996; Fitzgerald 2001). Nevertheless, through the discussions with Buddhists, it seemed that the detachment of their understanding of Buddhist tradition from the concept of religion also allowed them to detach Buddhism from Brahminism and the Hindu religion. They understood the concept of religion mostly in the context of Hinduism and nationalistic efforts to homogenize Indian traditions, which is why the word was most often interpreted as an outdated and sometimes threatening system that refutes equality, women's rights, feminism, acceptance of the LGBT community, and overall liberal democracy. From their point of view, the fusion of secularism and parts of Buddhist tradition created a successful strategy to maintain and protect their way of life from the Hindu social, political, and cultural sphere. However, this intellectual reinterpretation of Buddhist tradition generates tensions when other Buddhists "fail" to live up to the expectations of the strict rational approach.

A very specific role in the tension over worship practices is played by women in Ambedkarite communities, who other Ambedkarites generally consider to be less able to accept the secular perception of Buddhism and abandon rituals toward Hindu deities or Ambedkar and Buddha (Ramberg 2016: 225). Women in the Ambedkarite movement are usually given much less space and are treated with more expectations (e.g., the narratives around Ambedkar's second wife, Savita Ambedkar), although they play an essential role in the spread of Buddhism and its formation (Wasnik 2022). There are also only a few English or Marathi written texts representing the perspectives of Ambedkarite and Dalit women activists who often emphasize the need

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[14] This concerns mostly texts such as the *Annihilation of Caste*, *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, *Who Were the Shudras?*, and *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Become Untouchables*.

to consider the intersection of caste and gender (for example, Pawar and Moon 2014; Kamble 2022). With Dalit women having lower literacy and overall education than men, it is also much more difficult for them to access the information and materials on which the more educated younger generation of Ambedkarite men base their definition of the Buddhist tradition.[15]

During the interviews, some of the Buddhists complained that Buddhism had a difficult path to reach the Dalits in Maharashtra, for prior to Ambedkar's conversion, there were very few Buddhist monks and monasteries. Therefore, some of the middle-class young Buddhists travelled to Buddhist ashrams to experience life among Buddhist monks (mainly from Thailand, Burma, and Taiwan) because their parents and other Dalit converts were not familiar with Buddhist ritual customs. This subsequently linked their questions about where to get knowledge about the Buddhist tradition and what "being a Buddhist" means to them. One of the Ambedkarite Buddhists, Raahul, was upset about the low knowledge of Buddhism among Buddhists themselves and criticized other converts for not knowing their tradition: "…here are not real Buddhists, they are the ones converted from Hindu Mahar to Buddhism and the monks here are not trained monks, they don't know anything about Buddhism!" According to Raahul, converts should return to the original Pali texts, which explain that Buddhism is a philosophy and not a religion. These concerns were also expressed by other young Buddhists with higher education. In all cases, for young Ambedkarite Buddhists, knowledge of the Buddhist tradition appears to be crucial for identifying oneself as a Buddhist.

However, their information about tradition and understanding of Buddhist practices, texts, and concepts vary considerably. That, on the one hand, may be connected to a great diversity of practices among Buddhist communities in India connected to Buddhist schools from foreign countries (mostly Taiwan, Japan, Burma, and Thailand), or differences among *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis*, *dharmacharis* and *dharmacharinis* under other organizations and NGOs (such as the Buddhist Society of India, Triratna Buddhist Community or Vipassana meditation centres). Most of the young Buddhists were aware of the differences between different Buddhist schools (especially the Buddhist Society of India and Triratna Buddhist Community) and pointed them out when they didn't agree with the practices (such as meditations or *pujas*).[16] On the other hand, when asked about different Buddhist foreign activities or common artefacts and monuments, Ambedkarites would approach their identification from a broad global perspective by saying: "we [Buddhists] are all over the world" or "we are fighting for justice everywhere". This identification with collectivity exceeding India and claiming not only the history of Buddhist tradition (see Tartakov 2010) but also the collective actions of Buddhists around the globe was used as a ground for a very strong sense of belonging and pride. The situational shifting of focus toward differences in the local environment and the sense of commonality surrounding the global Buddhist network were two forces going in opposite directions expressed according to the situation and context.

This brings me to another aspect of forming a sense of groupness around Buddhist identification, namely being associated with change, activism, and agitation against the current social order associated with Brahmanism. Ambedkar's famous motto "Educate, Agitate, and Organize" is still recognized today as encapsulating Buddhist strategy towards resisting the prevailing milieu. Even though the specifics of what the change should look like were never explicitly defined, the measure of involvement in making the change real, tied some of the Ambedkarite Buddhists together and, in some cases, turned them against those who were seen as maintaining the old order, as Raahul implicated:

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[15] According to the Census 2011, proportion of literacy in the SCs population is 64% for men and 48% for women in all India (in Maharashtra the numbers are higher and more balanced with 76% of men and 63% of women being literate).
[16] See discussion about the organisations and different interpretations of Buddhism in Guru (1991) and Lokamitra (1991).

> We should try to make some changes in our lives. If they [Buddhists attending the ceremonies in viharas] don't make it, every Sunday morning they will come, they will sing prayers and go home. They come and go. Months will pass, years will pass, life will pass. Nothing will change.

The intensity of the urge for change in everyday life and of the mobilization of those who were, according to the Ambedkarite Buddhists, still "following the old ways" and were "part of the system," varied in time and place but grew stronger whenever a violent act or injustice against Dalits was reported in the media. Incidents such as the tragic death of the student Rohith Vemula in 2016, violent attacks during the celebration of the battle of Bhima Koregaon in 2018, the damage of the statue of Ambedkar in 2019, and other violent acts against Dalits reported across India every two-to-three weeks often boost a sense of commonality and groupness among Buddhists and also inspire mass conversions of Dalits to Buddhism or Christianity.[17] In this context, the "proper" understanding of Ambedkar and Buddhism is viewed by Ambedkarite Buddhists as a safeguard against worse attacks and a return to the time before Ambedkar's emancipation movement began. Munesh illustrated this need using the metaphor of the caste cage:

> Babasaheb Ambedkar took so much effort to help us escape from that cage [caste] and now if we don't understand him correctly again, the cage is already there.

The discourse around the right understanding, knowledge and practices, therefore, seems to be linked to the feeling of pressure and danger from the outside of the community. The need for a "correct understanding" of Ambedkar, as mentioned by Munesh, leads some Ambedkarite Buddhists to a more rigorous interpretation of who Ambedkarite Buddhists "are" and how they should look and act. Such a classification, strongly oriented toward the division of the population into "us" and "them", is, to some extent, a common way of maintaining social and moral order through human interaction (Bowker and Star 2000). However, in the case of Ambedkarite Buddhists and their intellectual efforts to form barriers between the concepts of the religious and the secular and groupness describing terms, the barriers can disrupt intercommunity interactions. Given Brubaker's and Gramsci's suggestions not to treat "groups" as homogeneous and substantial entities, it is not feasible to perceive Ambedkarite Buddhists as a unified population with the same goals, strategies, needs, and often even the same view of their current social, economic, and political situation (Brubaker 2004; Buttigieg 2013). The essentialization of who people identifying themselves as Ambedkarites, Dalits, or Buddhists in India are, and treating the categories as exclusive rather than contextual—or as categorical rather than relational as explained in Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 15)—contributes to the reluctance to cooperate and negotiate strategies between activists, and thus prevents understanding of individual needs among people from different social classes, areas (rural/urban), and with different levels of education.

Conclusion

In this article, I sought to provide insight into the challenges which today's Ambedkarite Buddhists and Dalits face while striving for a common sense of collectivity on different levels of their social, cultural and political activities. The analysis of their groupness dynamics around religious and secular understanding of Buddhism focused on how is the sense of collectivity of Ambedkarite Buddhists formed by the various interpretations of Buddhism and by the intercommunity interactions unfolding around them. Through an ethnographic probe into the lives and perceptions of the community from the perspective of a predominantly young generation of university-educated Buddhists, the research has highlighted significant interactional tensions in negotiating in-group and out-group boundaries. These stand on interpretations of Dalit-hood and "being Buddhist" from an essentialist and highly rational position that rejects potential blending between "religious" and "secular"

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[17] Some Buddhists also mentioned atrocities such as the Bathani Tola massacre in 1996 or the Kherlanji massacre in 2006 as examples of ongoing violence and discrimination in the legal system which Dalits still face today.

categories. The fragmentation of emancipatory goals and strategies among Ambedkarite Buddhists, which is reinforced by the external practices of nationalist movements, is thus simultaneously supported by internal tensions over the strictness of interpretations of Ambedkar's teachings and Buddhist practices as a secular philosophy. However, while recognizing the differences between local communities and activist endeavours in rural and urban areas, Ambedkarite Buddhists have consistently built bridges with Buddhist communities inside as well as outside of India, whether it be scattered diasporas of Ambedkarites abroad or Buddhist communities in Taiwan, Japan, or Burma. Encompassing themselves under the umbrella category of global Buddhism gives them both the opportunity to expand their influence and the economic and cultural capital to promote their visions in India.

Disclosure Statement

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

Biographical Note

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