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Consciousness Not Without Danger: Theorising Violence Faced by Dalit Converts

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Abstract

The present article views Dalit conversion as a gradual process or bottom-up reassessment strategy for a democratic environment assumed to provide a space to challenge the social structure of the Hindu caste system. To theorise this, the article deploys Victor Turner's concept of liminality and studies religious conversion as a transition, liminal process, *or* threshold that promises to bring change and alternation in the existing rigid structure. It aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how religious conversion functions as a space of both rupture and renewal in Dalit identity formation. The epigram of this article spells out the objectives to show when, why, and how they follow the path of conversion. It argues that due to their peculiar position in the Hindu caste hierarchy and exclusion from the Varna category, Dalits are open to change their religion from Hinduism to another religion. The willingness to change their Hindu religion either in the form of protest and assertion, or compulsion to escape from the practice of untouchability, explains the capacity of Dalits to break the caste structure and possibly become an entirely new self. Furthermore, the article argues that this process of becoming a new self is surrounded by danger; Dalits, as transgressors, who challenge the social stratification of the Hindu caste system by converting to other religions, are often drawn to violence. The prevalence of the concept of conversion as a consciously chosen path by Dalits strikes controversy among caste Hindus, and the flexibility with which Dalits approach religion becomes one of the main causes of violence. Finally, it argues that when Dalit consciousness manifests itself through conversion, it invites danger, threat, or violence, and this threat and violence may not necessarily appear in physical and overt form but in covert forms such as violations of certain constitutional rights.

Keywords

Dalit Consciousness, Religious Conversion, Liminality, Caste-Violence, Violation of Constitutional Rights

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Introduction

Religious conversion is an extremely personal phenomenon. Yet conversion, as personal as it often is, can also ramify outward into the world with great force, galvanizing new communities, breaking old ones, and completely transforming the political landscape. Early modernity sees conversion come into full flower as a sublime instrument of imperial power—a way for sovereigns to exercise control over their subjects' souls as well as their bodies, whether those subjects are Iberian Jews or Muslims, French Protestants, or English Catholics (Wiegers, 2016). However, conversion is also seen as a potent instrument of resistance to the power of the State or the Church, and also a way for subjects such as Dalits to stand against the practice of untouchability and the caste system in Hinduism.

This article spells out the objectives to show when, why, and how Dalits started following the path of conversion. To understand this, one needs to study various reasons that make Dalits as inferior human beings financially, spiritually, and politically, and last but not the least, numerically weak. This political and numerical weakness together arise from two interrelated facts: (a) The kind of heterogeneity Dalits as a social group has in terms of linguistic, regional, religious, and occupational identity and even their demonstration of socio-political assertions differ (b) Despite this heterogeneity, the socio-political history of Dalits reflects a remarkable sense of unity, rooted in their shared experiences of caste-based discrimination and experiences. A significant expression of this unity can be observed in the case of mass conversion movement to Buddhism. Through this collective act, Dalits not only attempt to challenge the deeply entrenched caste hierarchy but also seek to reclaim a distinct religious identity outside the folds of Hinduism. Despite these powerful assertions of autonomy and resistance, their efforts have often been disregarded and, in many instances, met with violence and systemic violations. One such watershed moment in the history of Dalit Political Identity is the Poona Pact of 1932, which made Dalits completely dependent upon Hindus for selecting their own leader. By denying the separate electorates to Dalits, the pact diluted their political independence and compelled them to be absorbed into the fold of Hinduism, which made it difficult for Dalit leaders to emerge without pandering to dominant caste interests. However, when Ambedkar's advocacy for separate electorates for the upliftment of Dalits was compromised, he reasserted the demand for separate electorates in 1947 in "*States and Minorities"*, due to his experience in politics which showed him that Dalit representatives in joint electorates were often submissive to majority interests.

However, this suppression of Dalits' distinct socio-political identity has a vast history starting from ancient times such as the violent suppressions of Buddhists including the loss of royal patronage of Buddhists, their systematic suppression through monastery destruction, monk killings, and cultural erasure including absorption of Buddha as a Vishnu avatar, stripping Buddhism of its revolutionary core by Brahminical traditions (Ambedkar, 1957; Thapar, 2012; and Omvedt, 2003). The systematic disappearance of Buddhism and the appropriation of Dalits' distinct

religious identity by Hindu majoritarian forces have been quite prevalent in Indian History along with this, institutional biases diluted the political potential of the Dalit conversion movement to Buddhism. Moreover, it has been pushed into its communalist corner by the dominant discourse, and due to which it could not provide an escape from their subaltern conditions (Fuchs, 2004; Chatterjee 2004; Lee, 2018)

Apart from this systematic historical suppression of ancient times, there have been many instances of violence—both overt and covert—faced by Dalits whenever they try to raise their voice for their rights, challenge the caste system, or denounce their Hindu identity by embracing a non-Hindu identity through conversion. For instance, the Nadar Movement of the nineteenth century, the Mahad Satyagraha in 1927, the Kalaram Temple Entry movement in 1930, the Kilvenmani massacre in 1968, the Khairlanji massacre in 2006, and the 2016 Una flogging underscore how economic and occupational assertions by Dalits provoke brutal responses. Even in 2020 and 2022, incidents such as the Hathras case and Bhima Koregaon violence reveal that Dalits' attempts to claim dignity and pride are met with both overt aggression and institutional bias, highlighting the persistent force of caste-based oppression in India.

Anand Teltumde (2016) contextualises these caste atrocities and violence faced by Dalits as an outcome of the interplay of three factors: "caste consciousness", "asymmetry of power between Dalits and non-Dalits", and "a triggering event". These triangular factors of caste violence, as discussed by Teltumde (2016), can provide a strand to begin my argument about conversion and its related caste violence.

Religious emancipation as a prominent way for assertions began to take shape as a political movement during colonial times, especially with the emergence of Dr. Ambedkar as a Dalit leader. Ambedkar's desire for religious conversion in his delivered speech on 31 May 1936 at the Yeola Conference encouraged his fellow Dalits to leave Hinduism. Ambedkar embraced Buddhism in 1956 and transformed this religious emancipation of Dalits into a political movement. However, this approach of religious emancipation was in practice before the arrival of Dr. Ambedkar. For instance, Bhakti saints like Basvanna, Ravidas, Kabir, Chokhamela, and Namdev at the time of the Bhakti movement of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, or the role of Iyotheethas, Ghasidas, Acchutanand, Narayan Guru in reclaiming the religion of the oppressed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, paved the way for a mass movement among Dalits.

Thus, the conversion movement emerged as a conscious tool for Dalits against the practice of the caste system and its prejudices and to reclaim their distinct religious identity separate from Hinduism. However, this consciousness does not come alone; it carries a danger or threat to the existing socio-political power and caste structure of Hinduism. Also, this danger is not unilinear; it functions from both sides. Dalits as transgressors, who are challenging the social stratification of the Hindu caste system by converting to other religions, are often drawn to violence. Therefore, the article argues that the prevalence of the concept of conversion as a consciously chosen path by Dalits strikes controversy among Hindu castes, or the flexibility with which Dalits approach religion becomes one of the main causes of violence. This threat can be

observed in both overt and covert forms of violence, which I call a violation of certain constitutional rights secured for religious freedom.

In order to understand the impact of Dalit religious conversion and its related violence and violations, the present article extends its study to political and cultural ethnography particularly focusing on the experience of Dalit converts, and how as converts they perceive new religion, its socio-political importance, belief system, and practice, and how they are perceived by the state and the immediate community i.e., Rajputs in this case. Anthropological concepts such as liminality and danger, which are largely used to understand symbols and cultural practices using the theory of power relations, identity, and hierarchies prevalent in existing social structures, provide a methodological approach to explore varieties of violence and violations faced by Dalit converts.

Dalit Consciousness and Religious Conversion

To articulate the relationship between Dalit consciousness and religious conversion, one needs to begin with the positioning of Dalits and their historically marginalized position in Hinduism. Due to their outcast or untouchable position in the Hindu caste system, like Africans, Dalits are also subjected to "overt and covert" collective sufferings (Bassey, 2007). Tila Kumar (2021) called this collective suffering a "cumulative domination" that Dalits have experienced for around two thousand years and to date continue to suffer discrimination and exclusion on various accounts, such as social, economic, and religious. Hence, it is argued that this collective suffering has developed into an oppressive consciousness which is largely anchored on status deprivation by "virtue of birth," which encompasses oppression brought on by inhumane material circumstances, helplessness, and ideological hegemony.

P.K. Kumar (n.d) defined consciousness as a complicated study as "it encompasses both the internal and external social world." Through consciousness, an individual or group becomes aware of their situation and experiences, hence transforms it into a reality similar to the external world in which people live and generate a collective consciousness about their shared misery and struggle.[1] Benny Shanon (1990) writes that consciousness is a process by which a person or a community not only becomes aware of themselves, their existence, and their experiences, but it also critically shapes the life, status, orientation, and future discourse of a historically oppressed and marginalized community.

P.K. Kumar (n.d.) writes that in the case of Dalit consciousness, it is the Brahmanical ideology that defines the role of each social group in a hierarchy that dictates the dominance of some social groupings over untouchable communities. These dominant and asymmetrical power structures between Dalits and non-Dalits or upper castes receive their legitimacy from the religious literature and philosophical systems

[1]Arulnathan, S. (2011, December 15–16). *Construction of Dalit consciousness.* Paper presented at the International Seminar on "Caste Out of Development," DMI House, St. Thomas Mount, Chennai, India.

dating from the Vedic period to the present day. The centrality of ascription on Dalits, according to the Brahminical canon, revolves around an uncivilized but well-designed language of purity and pollution. The legitimacy coming from Brahmanical sources has continuously hammered the minds of Dalits such that even Dalits have adopted and ascribed to this untouchable identity. In this context, Aloysius (1998) calls this situation a cycle of oppressors and oppressed in which Dalits are locked. It requires epistemological shifts to call into question various social phenomena such as caste atrocities, discrimination, and inhuman conditions, which are still accepted as neutral and given, and start appearing as an emanation of exploitative social relations.

Religious conversion among Dalits indicates an epistemological shift. This shift reveals the social reality of a particular identity—or multiple identities—that have long been oppressed. Through this new lens of subjective consciousness, Dalits begin to understand their existing socio-economic and cultural position in society. This awareness highlights the structures that keep them subjugated As a result, it fosters a strong sense of solidarity among the oppressed. (Aloysius, 1998). When Ambedkar led a mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism in 1956, it was not merely a religious move but deeply political, rooted in Ambedkar's intellectual journey and quest for a rational and egalitarian spiritual path (Zelliot, 1992; Jaoul, 2018). Zelliot (1992) further adds that Ambedkar was drawn to Buddhism for two reasons, namely, its philosophical and historical roots in challenging Brahminical Hinduism. Through the ethnographic studies of Dalit conversion to Buddhism in Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, Jaoul (2018) explains how the religious emancipation movement among Dalits created a sense of self-emancipation. It also highlights the limitations of liberal democratic frameworks that provide institutional and legal protection to Dalits. However, Ambedkar believed that true emancipation required a transformation of consciousness and culture, not just legal protection.

Therefore, religious conversion is seen as a tool or a bottom-up approach where a convert, without any external force, consciously chooses to adopt a new faith that justifies the moral and ethical grounds of humanity that they are not perceived as being a 'Hindu'. The consciousness of oppression in the line of religious conversion is seen as an urge, or a will, towards the change in social praxis (Aloysius, 1998).

Religious Conversion as a Liminal Process

Marry Douglas (1966) and Victor Turner (1969) were two prominent anthropologists who used the concept of liminality and danger to understand unequal power structures. Turner (1969) describes liminality[2] as an important or revolutionary phase of life to incorporate change and reinvent a new status quo. This potential change, which Turner

[2]To explain his point, Victor Turner borrowed the concept of liminality from Van Gennep's work "Rites of Passage" in written in 19. According to Gennep all the rites of passage are marked by three phases or processes: separation, margins (liminal), and, aggregation. The first phase comprises where the individual is detached from its previous social structure and cultural conditions. In the second phase the liminal period the individual is in an ambiguous position; he passes through a cultural reality that he has few or none of the attributes of the

called liminality, involves an in-between state, i.e., "betwixt and between", reshaping the status quo. He also calls this phenomenon a "bottom-up approach" to fight against the rigid structure of society. Thus, liminality involves letting go of previously held views, attitudes, and status and being prepared to reconsider and recalibrate; it means living life in a transition, in between, taking nothing for granted and recognizing oneself perpetually at a crossroads or threshold (Bigger, 2015). However, it is not just a form of cultural manifestation of *communitas*—an unstructured community sharing a strong morality among its members when they are in the threshold process—but also as a "power of the weak". In a more precise term, the sacred side of the low status or position which carries danger to those concerned about the maintenance of the structure (Turner, 1969).

Moreover, this structural order is always surrounded by prescriptions, prohibitions, and conditions. While disorder has no pattern, rather it has potential for indefinite patterning that emulates both power and danger (Douglas, 1966). In this context, Douglas (1969) argues that binaries of purity and pollution, order and disorder, or form and formlessness, are maintained, and controlled by prescriptions, prohibitions, and conditions. Since liminality represents disorder and formlessness, it is destructive and challenges the existing social structures and patterns. While referring to Van Gennep's rites of passage, she pointed out that the threshold of every passage contains danger, as the person is in between, does not wholly belong to any state, and may harm the existing structured reality. Thus, a transition is an undefinable state where the person is in danger and emanates danger to other definable patterns and structures. Therefore, when a Dalit changes his position in the given hierarchical social structure and attempts to cross the boundary that sets apart the sacred and profane or purity and pollution, the same unleashes danger from both sides. The one who breaks the authoritative structure is looked at as a transgressor, and the one who is part of the oppressive structure finds it a violation of the existing values and thereby attempts to protect it by any means, violent and non-violent.

Religious conversion as a transition or liminal process offers a threshold to bring change and alternation in the existing rigid structure. It aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how religious conversion functions as a space of both rupture and renewal in Dalit identity formation. It functions as a bottom-up approach for Dalits, where they go through a gradual process of change, carrying revolutionary spirits. So in this sense, Dalit conversion does not indicate a dramatic event or a sudden and radical change of personality and faith like the traditional Jacobian conversion is, rather it is a medium to mark a new beginning—a beginning of a new 'self-conscious being'—which may or may not have arrived at its final desired destination. But, if given the right direction, they may have the capacity to create an alternate path (Austin-Broos, 2003). Therefore, it indicates a transition capable of bringing change in structure or any life occurrences involving rituals. It is important to note that changes can have positive or negative impacts.

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past or the coming state. Finally, in the third phase, he reinvents and reincorporates again in a relatively stable state.

As a passage, it is an evolving and continuous process embedded in forms of social practices and experiences that provide a space for negotiations and opportunities to blur the boundaries of the existing rigid and structured categories of identities. Religious conversion can be examined as a gateway for reorientation and identification that helps to understand various nuances of any identity and its category that may represent fuzziness and fluidity. Since the term conversion itself is a fuzzy term without any clear meaning, and a sociological method of study that can grasp all variables of a converted identity (Asad, 1996; Coleman, 2003). Due to this, it often fails to articulate the syncretistic nature of 'conversion' and its political and social importance, i.e., the manner in which conversion occurs and is portrayed as a natural phenomenon of religious and cultural interactions. Therefore, J.D.Y. Peel (1977) is very critical of using the term conversion and limiting its meaning only to a "transfer of primary religious affiliation" as there can be other motives, and those motives are far more important than a mere spiritual one. However, these non-spiritual socio-political motives of conversion deal with the idea of domination and cultural hegemony, which have long been ignored (Asad, 1996).

The study of religious conversion has largely been explained in terms of radical change in the lives of converts. In this article, I argue that religious conversion may not necessarily bring radical change in the belief system and practices of converts. Rather, it calls into question the claim of religious conversion as the change of "primary of religious affiliations" and argues that it is a gradual process through which various changes can be brought into the existing social structure. Religious conversion in India also represents a gradual and fluid process of changing affiliations of religious beliefs and traditions, offering a range of possibilities that carry various modes and motives (Robinson & Clarke, 2003). Reflecting on these modes and motives, it is argued that religious conversion in India has two purposes: first, as a form of protest that the Dalits use in their fight against the caste system, and second, as a transforming agent of political demography implied for different purposes and players (Robinson & Clarke, 2003). Robinson in her work on religious conversion in Goa in the sixteenth century argues that it was not Dalits in large numbers but upper caste Brahmins who converted to Christianity. She further adds that both Dalits and Brahmins had different motives and methods; the former converted to Christianity to escape the caste system and untouchability, while the latter converted to Christianity to challenge the Islamic rule of Adil Shah.[3] It is also interesting to note those Brahmin who converted

[3]Robison's (2003) writes that the socio-political situation of Goa during the sixteenth century was exclusively divided into two categories: first, the village community which was based on agriculture or domestic crafts and administered by the *gauncari* system. *Gauncars,* who majorly consisted of Brahmans, had the administrative power to control and maintain the village and its Hindu society. Second, the city area was centered around trade and was mainly controlled by the Adil Shah dynasty (1489-1510) and its policies.

Furthermore, Adil Shah's rulers forced the villagers to serve as domestic servants and seized communal lands from them (Ibid., p. 229). Due these strained relationships between Muslim rulers and local Hindus especially with landed *gauncars Brahmins*, *gauncars Brahmins* not only welcome the Portuguese but were ready to convert to Christianity in order to dethrone

to Christianity did not change their social-cultural norms and privileges associated with their caste hierarchy (Robinson & Clarke, 2003). They also argued that religious conversion in India has been backed by both political regimes and used as a form of resistance starting from the emergence of Buddhism and Jainism in ancient times; lower caste or Dalit conversion to Sikhism, Christianity, and Islam in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and Navayana Buddhism in the post-independence period (Robinson & Clarke, 2003).

Torkel Brekke (2003) in his study of conversion to Buddhism described the process of ordinary people who joined the tradition of the Buddhist religion. He argues that conversion in Buddhism used to be, "a process of going through a life of a *gaha pati*- to life as wanderers". It depicts a slow gradual process that may take several years. In his words, conversion to Buddhism suggests a cross-cultural phenomenon wherein individuals who join a new religious sect belonging to different socio-religious backgrounds come to a point of faith after an ideal dramatic moment preceded by either a spiritual or socio-political crisis (Brekke, 2003). For instance, the emergence and the spread of Buddhism was not only a search for salvation and a true path but also a protest against the then-increasing Brahmanical power between 400-350 BCE (Aloysius, 1998, and Omvedt, 2003).[4] The socio-religious hierarchy and the ritually

Adil Shah dynasty (Ibid). Thus, the economically and politically divisive structure of Goa gave ways to the Portuguese to enter into the political domain and further made their smooth establishment. The Portuguese with the help of missionaries converted the Hindus of Goa. They initially adopted two methods for conversion: first, they targeted orphans by offering privileges. Second, they attracted adherents to converts by allocating jobs and offices. But eventually, it did not prove to be a successful measure for them as they failed to attract Hindus to convert in good numbers (Ibid., 303).

However, when Goa was lost to the Portuguese in 1910 and by 1940 they enacted certain laws against the Hindus, especially against the upper caste *gauncars* and priests who refused to convert. According to the law, those who refuse to convert will either lose their property or were forbidden to perform Hindu rituals and ceremonies. For instance, there were general councils for Hindu *gauncars* for internal matters. The new Portuguese law put restrictions on the functioning of the general council unless they include Hindu *gauncars* who had converted to Christianity. Due to this aggressive behavior of the Portuguese, Hindu *gauncars* protested the practice of conversion in 1583. Five Portuguese lost their life in this protest (Ibid, 306). After the incident, the missionaries soon realized their mistakes and changed their approach by convincing *gauncars* that they would not lose the ritual privileges that they enjoy in the Hindu caste hierarchy. To convert Dalits, they were offered to enter the church and were assigned several roles on the premises of the church which was a forbidden task for them in the Hindu religion (Ibid).

[4]The middle of the first millennium BCE period witnessed two contending cultural-religious traditions such as *Samana* and *Brahmanic* traditions. The *Samana* cult (which is *Shramanik* in *Sanksrit*) is generally translated, as "ascetic", "renouncer", "recluse", and "hermit", etc which suggests that "*Samana* were those who toiled not to produce commodities or service for survival and social development but to find the meaning of life". They distanced themselves from the norms of social life and chose a homeless life. The Brahmanic tradition, on the contrary, is derived from the Vedas and grounded in the "householder" Brahmanic elite which addressed "Brahman" as superior status characterized by intellectual knowledge and ritual performing skills (Omvedt, 2003).

legitimate varna system gave authority to control the actual power within the hands of Brahmans and simultaneously limited the access to power and opinion of others or non-Brahmans (Omvedt, 2003, and Aloysius, 1998). It is suggested that the *tribal-gana-sangha* category of *Kshtariya* origin at the time of spiritual and political domination crisis may have inclined towards a religious solution by associating themselves with the new self that was opposed to a caste-like structure that gives value to hierarchies and superior statues based on birth; a principle that was, in fact, a projection of Brahmanic philosophy and in its initial phase to develop (Omvedt, 2003).[5]

Religious conversion of Tamilakams to Buddhism during colonial times also suggests a similar kind of consciousness where Dalits assert distinct Socio-political and cultural identity with the intention of a homogeneous fight against caste oppression (Aloysius, 1998). Caste as a basis of cultural homogeneity with end-to-end encryption with the custom of endogamy is a type of prioritized domination of Brahminical supremacy that not only maintains the power hierarchy but also degrades Dalits and women (Ambedkar, 1916). In this sense, Dalit conversion to Buddhism rejects the meta-narratives of the Hindu religion that subsumes other native religious identities existing across Indian society. Therefore, it becomes essential to study conversion carefully as it manifests in multiple ways and indefinite patterns that emulate both power and resistance (Omvedt, 2003 and Robinson & Clarck, 2003).

Dalit Converts, Liminality, Danger and Caste Violence

Since conversion instigates a journey, it is seen as liminal. It provides Dalit converts a space for negotiation and changes to their existing identities as untouchables and their relations with upper-caste Hindus. These changes are non-spiritual as they invoke varieties of interpretation and meanings. For example, in Turner's (1969) words, one can call it the "power of the weak," or in Viswanathan's (1998) words, they are 'resistance' and 'dissent.' While theorising the conversion as the most profound way of manifesting dissent and resistance by the minority and marginalized sections, Viswanathan (1998) argues that Ambedkar's decision to embrace Buddhism represents a conscious socio-political move to annihilate the existing caste identity given to Dalits based on the very notion of the hierarchical structure of the Hindu caste system.

Dalit converts, as dissenters, embody an uneasy and challenging consciousness, urging the oppressed to confront this renewed awareness of their oppression. Religious conversion gives Dalits a new identity that threatens the established binary of 'purity and pollution' deeply ingrained in the Hindu caste system. So, this threat or danger, as Douglas (Douglas) has argued, "is not unilinear; it functions from both sides though".

[5]For example, a young *Brahman Vesetta* described a *Brahman* who is born seven births in a family and behaves nobly by birth (*jati*). On the contrary, the Buddhist vision of society has denied biological differences between human beings and insisted on karma alone. It was one of the first challenges registered against the caste system wherein Buddhism raised questions about *Brahman* dominance and promoted not only individual renunciation and freedom, creating a vibrant, open, and commercially developing society but also social equality by opening the gates for Dalits into *sangha*[48] (Omvedt, 2003 and Tola & Dragonetti, 2013).

As discussed earlier, there are many instances both in history and in the present times whenever Dalits have tried to raise their voice against the caste system and demand equality, either by entering the temple, emulating the lifestyle of upper castes, among other instances, they have faced both overt and covert violence. Several episodes demonstrate how conversions can escalate communal tensions and violence in their raw and physical forms, making religious identity a flashpoint in Indian politics. From 1905 to 1947, conversion was a significant factor behind communal violence in Bengal and other parts of the country (Engineer, 2004). A notable example is the 1981 mass conversion of Dalits to Islam in Meenakshipuram, Tamil Nadu, which provoked widespread anger among India's Hindus and triggered riots, revealing how caste and communal issues intersect in Indian politics. These conversions are argued to have fueled communal violence in cities like Ahmedabad, Pune, and Sholapur in 1982 (Khan, 1989, and Engineer, 2004). Further, incidents of anti-Christian violence in Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh from 2006 to 2008 highlight how political and religious agendas contributed to suppress minorities (Bauman, 2008, and Ponniah, 2017).

It is important to note that the above-discussed cases reflect the physical form of violence. They also suggest that violence was seen as a reaction of communal feeling and antagonistic relations that developed during the colonial time between the two religious communities, such as Islam and Christianity on the one hand and Hinduism on the other hand. However, violence related to Dalit conversion can be observed in covert forms where it usually appears as a violation of rights and non-recognition of Dalits' distinct religious identity. This can be observed when there is conversion from Hinduism to any Indic religion or religious traditions such as Buddhism, Sikhism, or bhakti religious sects. For instance, in the case of conversion in Shabbirpur village, 180 households of Dalits converted to Buddhism after a deadly caste conflict with the Rajputs. In this case, the nature of violence before conversion was overt in nature, as both the communities in the caste-clash had witnessed violence in physical form. If one studies the nature of violence after conversion, it is covert in nature. Dalit converts in the village did not face any physical threat or violence over their decision to leave Hinduism and embrace a Buddhist identity. However their decision to denounce Hinduism after violence and humiliation, they appear as transgressors, who defy caste hierarchies and reclaim a Buddhist identity along with Ravidas' bhakti, face violation of religious rights that are guaranteed under Article 25.1 of the Indian Constitution.

Dalits' Religious Expression, its Materiality, and Contested Public Space

Dalits after conversion to Buddhism continue their previous spiritual affiliation with the Bhakti of Ravidas,[6] as they were followers of Ravidas before converting to

[6]Sant Ravidas Guru, a 15th century poet of bhakti movement, born into Chamar caste and was known for his profession as a leather worker. He emerged as a major social reformer in regions like Uttar Pradesh, Panjab, and their neigbouring areas and believed in the principle of sharing God across all divisions that society instituted, including the significant religious dissection.

Buddhism. After conversion, they neither changed their belief in Ravidas nor made a major difference in their cultural and ritual performances associated with the bhakti of Ravidas. The continued religious and spiritual affiliation with the Bhakti tradition of Ravidas can be understood through its deep connection to both the historical experiences of oppression and the ongoing quest for dignity among marginalized communities. On one hand, this affiliation serves as a means of reconnecting with their subaltern and oppressed religious heritage, reaffirming a distinct identity rooted in resistance. On the other hand, as Gail Omvedt (2008) insightfully argues, Ravidas's vision of *Begumpura*—a "city without sorrow," representing a casteless, classless, and tax-free society grounded in equality and justice—offers a powerful social imaginary. This utopian vision has resonated with anti-caste thinkers for over five centuries, presenting a radical critique of dominant socio-religious hierarchies and proposing alternative frameworks for a just and egalitarian society.

In order to make their assertion visible, Dalits in Shabbirpur village made a few symbolic changes concerning their previous Hindu identity—they stopped worshiping and celebrating Hindu idols, gods, goddesses, and festivals, they do not visit Hindu temples, recite the hymns, or invite Hindu priests to officiate auspicious ceremonies. Instead, they have developed their own semiotics and religious texts such as 'Ravidas Chalisa' around the bhakti of Ravidas. Images, symbols and teachings of Ravidas, Ambedkar, and Buddha are not just common and visible sites in their houses, but their teachings are reflected in their everyday conversation. For instance, during interviews and group discussions, a number of Dalits did not just consciously refrain from using certain words; they were very critical about their usage. They questioned the word *puja-paath* and argued that true worship requires complete understanding, rejecting traditional *puja-paath* as a practice imposed by *Manuvaad*, instead advocated to embrace Ravidas, Ambedkar, and Buddha's teachings based on rational thinking and equality. Jagpal Singh (1998), in his work on Dalit communities in Meerut and Western Uttar Pradesh, has also highlighted how Ambedkar's images, teachings, and Buddhist symbols were embraced by the community, leading to a reconfiguration of their social identities and a collective resistance against caste oppression.

The egalitarian social philosophy of Ravidas provides a strong base for Dalit consciousness in the village, which comes from the rich historical Dalit assertion in northern India, especially in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. Many Ravidas shrines and temples, which are also called *Deras*, were constructed to assert their separate religious identity. Ram Ronki (2004) also mentioned that several organizations came into existence such as "India Adi Dharam Mission" which constructed "Shri Guru Ravidass Janam Asthan Mandir (Temple of Shri Guru Ravidas's Birthplace)" at Seer Goverdhanpur, Banaras. Although the presence of this temple comes in the domain of reclaiming religious space and rituals, it marks the significance of Dalits in the silent "social revolution" in Banaras. It has acquired perhaps a place of sacred importance

Ravidas's firm perception of equality made him a revolutionary social leader among his followers, or more specifically, among Dalits (Hawley and Juergensmeyer, 1988).

among Dalits—where millions of devotees from India pay homage to Ravidas—much like any pilgrimage place of dominant religions.

Manuela Ciotti (2010) in her ethnographic research in rural Banaras highlights the importance of material culture in this identity transformation, wherein various objects, attire, and symbols through which the community expresses its new identity and asserts its presence in the socio-political landscape. Although she has not explicitly discussed religious conversion, she opens with the idea of "retro-modernity", where the Chamar community reclaims a glorious, imagined past to legitimize its modern aspirations and illustrates how economic liberalization and affirmative action have altered the material conditions and symbolic and traditional boundaries of caste practices. For instance, Ciotti refers to the phrase, " now we can touch anything," that reflects the embodied experience of caste mobility. Consumer goods and public space, school and education, factors that challengedegrading caste roles, are becoming new markers of Dalit identity as educated citizens and spiritual equals.

Ravidas *Julus* and State Surveillance

Religious processions have historically played a significant role in people's religious, social, and political lives. They act as visible public religious activities that integrate religious and secular elements by providing communities with means to celebrate their faith through various semiotics and symbols in front of a large and diverse public. It also offers spaces for marginalised groups to assert and reinforce their values and distinct religious identity. However, these kinds of public expressions often lead to tensions and conflicts between different social and religious groups.

Ravidas *Julus*, on the occasion of Ravidas Jayanti is a popular religious procession among Dalits and has been serving as an important medium to express their religiosity in secular public spaces. Such *Julus* are common sights to observe in western Uttar Pradesh, where I conducted my fieldwork for my Ph.D. It was Swami Achhutanand who first introduced the Ravidas *Julus* in Kanpur in the early twentieth century, marking a grand celebration with ward committees decorating the *Jhanki* (moving stage) featuring images and portraits of Sant Ravidas (Bellwinkel, 2007).

Sarah Beth (2005) explores three critical stages of the *Julus* starting from the spatial or temporal stage, the confrontational stage, to the civic stage, and argues how the challenges that each successive stage presents describe the socio-political process where Dalits interact with the larger society dominated by upper castes. It is a journey of Dalit socio-political claims that are navigated through Dalit localities, which enter upper-caste neighborhoods, and finally negotiate with government authorities. It represents a sense of belonging and solidarity among Dalits, which passes through various tensions and conflicts due to retaliation and resistance by upper castes, and lastly, it confronts civic engagements like obtaining permissions, dealing with state-imposed restrictions, etc. Therefore, these *Julus* act as a strategy of popular assertion

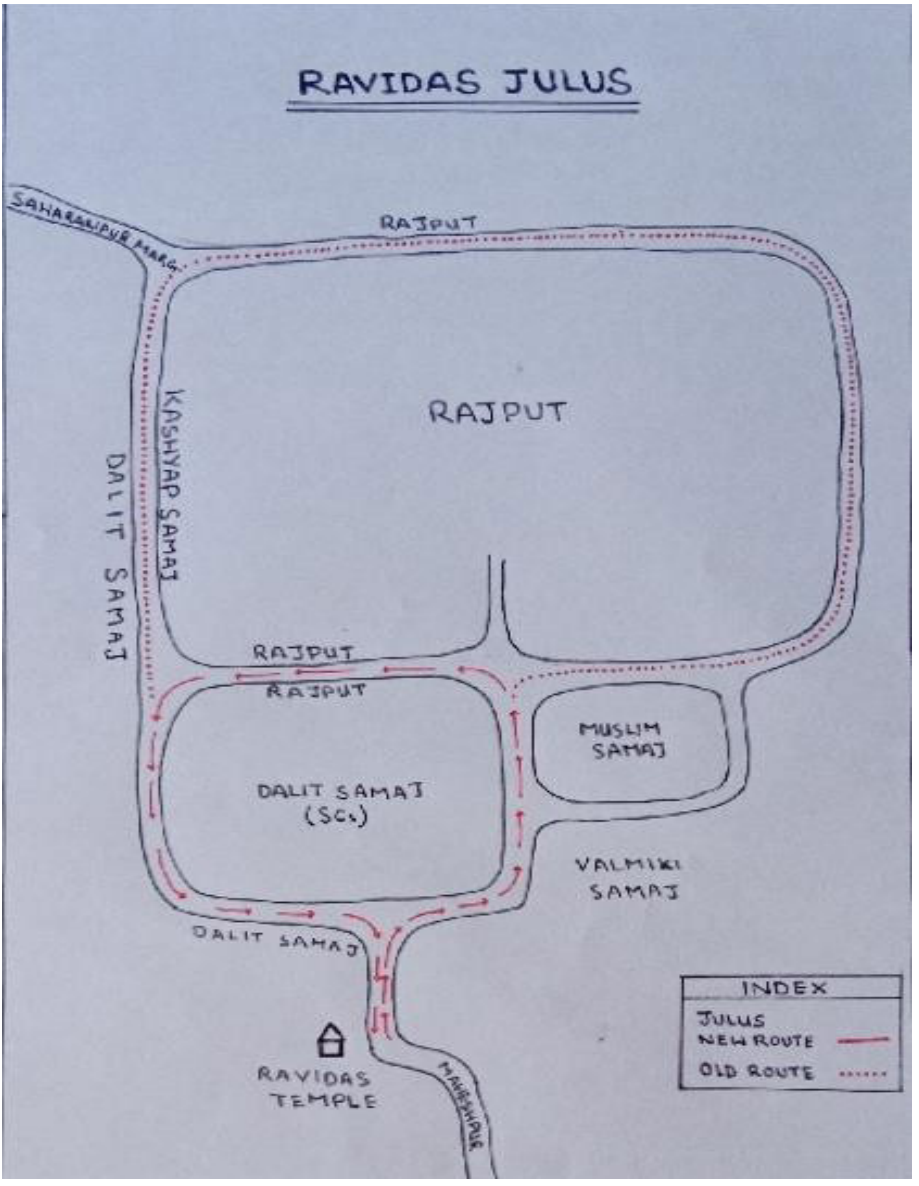
for Dalits to reclaim public spaces while allowing them to engage in religious and material practices that challenge upper-caste dominance in the public sphere (Jaoul, 2007). For instance, the emergence of a Dalit neighbourhood in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, where Dalit youths transformed a site of Hindu-Muslim violence into a bastion of Dalit political activism through the Bunyad movement including organizing public events, installing monuments, and staging disciplined performances to assert Dalit presence and authority in the neighborhood rooted in the philosophy of Ambedkar (Jaoul, 2012).

In order to claim their rights in public spaces, Dalits in Shabbirpur village celebrate Ravidas Jayanti and organize Ravidas *Julus*. As mentioned earlier, these processions are not just a celebration of faith, they also represent a symbolic assertion of Dalits living in those areas. However, after the deadly caste-clash, they could not organize such a religious procession and found their religious rights had been restricted in the name of security and surveillance.

During the fieldwork, it was informed that for the last 24 years, Dalits of Shabbirpur peacefully organised the procession without facing any opposition from Rajputs or local authorities. Before the violent incident that took place on May 5, 2017, between the Rajput and Dalit communities in Shabbirpur village, Ravidas *Julus* in the village used to be an elaborate procession featuring chariots carrying images of Dalit leaders like Ravidas, Ambedkar, Achhutanand, Kanshi Ram, and Gautam Buddha. Dalit women, men, and children would actively participate in the procession. During the *Julus*, children and youth dress up as Ravidas and perform plays depicting the life of their *guru*. They would dance, sing bhajans, and chant slogans like "Ravidas ki Jai" and "Babasaheb Ambedkar ki Jai" with pride and joy.

The situation drastically changed after the caste clash in 2017. Dalits argued that attitudes of the Rajput community toward Ravidas became hostile, and government biases against the Dalits' celebration of Jayanti became more evident. For example, the traditional route of the *Julus*, which once used to start at the Ravidas Temple and traversed the entire village—passing through all neighborhoods, including those of Dalits, Valmikis, Kashyaps, Rajputs, and Brahmins—is now limited to Dalit and Muslim neighborhoods with only a few Rajput households included. Moreover, they need permission for the procession from the office of the Additional District Magistrate (ADM) in Rampur Maniharan, Saharanpur. The permission letter states that this new route is not permanent but has been intentionally designated to ensure security and safety within the village. The newly imposed guidelines also included bans on loud music, provocative slogans, etc. But for Dalits, it is an attempt to restrict their religious expression and assertion that they will not accept.

Mahalveer Singh, a local activist who also provided relevant documents regarding the government guidelines, expressed safety concerns over the new route. He allegedly argued that it passes through those neighborhoods of Rajputs who were involved in the 2017 violence.



The Modified Route of Ravidas *Julus* (Old-New)

Source: The map is drawn with the help of Mahalveer Singh

Therefore, Dalits refrained from organizing the *Julus* that year and filed a Special Leave Petition (SLP) in the Supreme Court. Dalits also claimed that the modified route violated constitutional provisions on several grounds such as Article 25 (freedom of religion), Article 26 (management of religious affairs), and Article 38(1) (state responsibility for social justice) of the Indian Constitution. One of the respondents, Prateek said:

"We cannot accept this newly proposed route as a replacement for our traditional ones. We will not allow the government's conspiracy to succeed and incite caste-clashes and riots in the village since the new route passes through those Rajputs who were involved in the clash."

He also added that due to this Dalits of Shabbirpur celebrated Ravidas Jayanti without the *Julus* in 2019 and sought legal recourse through the Allahabad High Court. However, they were dissatisfied with the judgment of the Allahabad High Court and appealed to the Supreme Court in 2020 through the case "Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Samaj Kalyan Samity & ANR versus The State of Uttar Pradesh & ORS."

The Supreme Court, upon hearing the counsel, made the following order:

> "Since the date on which the procession was to be taken out, namely, 8 February 2020, has already elapsed, the grievance has been rendered infructuous. On this ground, we are not inclined to entertain the Special Leave Petition under Article 136 of the Constitution. The Special Leave is dismissed."
>
> "However, we clarify that should the petitioners be aggrieved at any future date, it would be open to them to pursue such remedies as are available in law."

The Supreme Court dismissed the petition on procedural grounds. The court stated that since the procession date had already passed, the grievance was rendered infructuous. However, the Court allowed the petitioners to seek legal remedies in the future if similar issues arise again. As a result, Dalits were compelled to follow the newly altered route for the Jayanti procession. Moreover, on the day of the Jayanti, a significant contingent of police forces was deployed to ensure safety and security. For Dalits, the police presence in significant numbers created an intimidating atmosphere, and due to this, they could not celebrate the Jayanti the way they wished to.

However, this kind of surveillance is not a new phenomenon. In intensified conflict situations, it is Dalits who often face state surveillance, restrictions, and institutional bias. While ostensibly upholding democratic rights, state authorities often view these gatherings with suspicion, leading to surveillance, restrictions, or even suppression (Jodhka, 2013, and Lee, 2021). Owen Lynch, in his book *Politics of Untouchability* in 1969, discusses the state's response to the then-emerging Dalit neighborhoods like Bhim Nagar in Agra and its shifting allegiance from Hindu nationalist parties to Dalit-centric movements. He argues that this shift in local power ended up facing state surveillance, which reflects the broader challenges faced by marginalized communities striving for political recognition and rights.

In the case of Shabbirpur, one can observe how a historically peaceful event, after the 2017 caste clash and subsequent government-imposed restrictions, was transformed into a contested space.

On the one hand, they had to approach the court, as they were not able to organize a *Julus* on Jayanti as was done for 24 years until 2017. Moreover, after the caste-

clash, they were asked by the Additional District Magistrate (ADM) of Saharanpur to change the traditional routes of the *Julus* and restrict it within the household of Dalits and Muslims. In response to a change in the traditional routes of the *Julus*, Dalit converts from Shabbirpur approached both the High Court and later the Supreme Court of India, where the case continues to be listed. Since then, they have faced difficulties, and could not organize a single *Julus* to celebrate the Jayanti to date. They end up compromising their religious freedom, which Article 25.1 of the Indian Constitution pledges to its religious minorities, and hence they view these restrictions as a systematic attempt to marginalise their cultural and religious identity, reinforcing the caste-based discrimination that persists in Indian society.

On the other hand, Rajputs do not observe Dalit conversion as a threat. In conversation with Rajputs, with whom Dalits clashed with in the village, it was discovered that: (a) They (Rajputs) still view them as lower caste or untouchables, (b) They do not view Hinduism and Buddhism as two different religions, (c) They do acknowledge the position of Ravidas in a Dalits's life; however, for them, Ravidas and his followers are nothing but lower caste Hindus. Hence, they do not recognize the claim of the Dalit converts whether it is the bhakti of Ravidas or Buddhism, as a distinct religious identity separate from Hinduism.

Conclusion

Violence related to Dalit conversion is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. It can be understood in different ways depending on the religious as well as socio-political dynamics of the situation of the converts. The identity of the convert, his sociopolitical position, and in which one is converting, whether Indic or non-Indic religion, not just reveals the relationship between violence and conversion but also the nature of violence. In a more precise term, what kind of violence a Dalit convert will face depends on the religion he chooses to convert to. In the case of Dalit conversions to non-Indic religions, violence tends to be overt, raw, and physical, often driven by a fear of losing cultural and social control within the Hindu fold. In contrast, conversions to Indic religions, which theoretically reject the caste system, face more covert forms of violence, i.e., legal and political obstacles. This legal and political obstacle is nothing but a politics of non-recognition where not only Dalit identity but also their efforts and protests to reclaim their distinct religious identity have been appropriated under Hindu majoritarian politics.

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