

In Search of a Utopian Society: Situating 'Dalit' Conversions in Contemporary India

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Abstract

Religious conversions, particularly those originating from marginalized communities, have been a subject of scholarly investigation in colonial and post-colonial India. Dalit conversions, in particular, have been examined not only as an attempt in exercising freedom of conscience but also as an act encompassing various dimensions. The existing body of literature on Dalit conversions has recognized them as instances of social protest, group assertion, a direct challenge to caste-based dominance, the pursuit of egalitarianism, and the quest for self-respect. Although discussions surrounding Dalit conversions to different religions have intensified in post-independence India, conversions to Islam and Christianity have received notable attention. It is widely acknowledged that Dalit conversions stand in opposition to the principles of caste system, religious hegemony, and homogenization. This article by examining the instances of Dalit conversions that have taken place in independent India, delves into three significant aspects: first, comprehending the acquired religious identity of Dalits; second, exploring the aspirations of Dalit converts; and third, examining the construction of a utopia within the context of the adopted religion. Additionally, the article argues that Dalit conversions should not be regarded as an endpoint but rather as a transformative journey into an envisioned utopia.

Keywords

Caste, religion, Dalit conversions, acquired identity, utopian society

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Introduction

Conversion...as a social rebirth, a gaining of a new identity, a way in which the Dalits were leading.

—*Gail Omvedt (1992)*

Numerous scholars have extensively explored the phenomenon of conversion as a response to caste-based oppression. The marginalized Dalit community, enduring grave caste atrocities, often sought relief by abandoning their traditional faiths and embracing alternative religions. Instances of mass conversions among disadvantaged segments of society to foreign religions have been observed since the medieval era (Bayly 1999; Robinson & Clarke 2003). Particularly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a significant migration of marginalized groups occurred, with many finding sanctuary in Christianity. Notably, in the 1930s, approximately half of India's Roman Catholic population converted through mass movements, and a substantial proportion of Protestants also resulted from such collective conversions (Picket 1933). This trend gained momentum after 1850 when missionary groups collectively decided to challenge caste inequalities and discrimination within Christian communities. The compelling desire for brotherhood, human dignity, and solidarity among oppressed castes propelled them towards seeking freedom and liberation at any cost. Consequently, conversion to Christianity, akin to previous conversions to Islam, represented an ardent endeavour to break free from the stranglehold of the caste system.

Some scholars posit that lower-caste converts to Islam and Christianity viewed these religions as social alternatives to their status. By embracing Islam or Christianity, lower-caste Indians were better equipped to challenge the social presumptions upheld by the upper castes (Sikand 2003; Dale 2003). Similarly, Hindu converts found solace in Sikhism as a means of escaping the discriminatory caste system (Juergensmeyer 1988). However, Bayly (2004) contends that motivations for conversion should not be solely attributed to changes in social status or structure. Conversion does not always entail a complete transformation of beliefs and practices. In fact, early converts to Islam in South India were equally driven by the pursuit of other desired attributes, such as power and sacred energy (Bayly 2004). The multifaceted motivations behind conversions underscore the complex and dynamic nature of the phenomenon.

In contrast, certain scholars argue that conversions to Christianity before India's independence were primarily motivated by the desire to break free from caste-based discrimination, with Dalits being at the forefront of seeking out missionaries. However, this endeavor was met with strong opposition from individuals belonging to the upper castes (Lobo 2001). Eaton (1997) posits that Indians actively participated in the conversion process, integrating aspects of external religions into their pre-existing worldviews rather than blindly adopting foreign ideas. This underscores the agency of Dalits in embracing a new faith, signifying a deliberate search for meaning

and autonomy (Sebastian 2003). Additionally, folk or popular religion emerged as a vehicle for promoting egalitarianism and ending oppression (Puniyani 2005).

The Bhakti movement and its influential leaders, such as Kabir, Ravidas, Chokamela, and Nanak, profoundly challenged social hierarchies and vehemently condemned caste and untouchability (Omvedt 2008). This movement served as a bridge between major religions, fostering interfaith dialogue, promoting social equality, rejecting elitism, advocating for the role of women, and advancing anti-caste egalitarianism (Puniyani 2005). Moreover, Buddhism has been regarded as a rebellion against the oppressive Brahminical Hinduism that was introduced to India by the Aryans. Esteemed scholars, including Bishop Azariah, have emphasized Buddhism as a means of resistance against the oppressive Brahminical Hinduism, thereby becoming significant for the indigenous non-Brahminical people, now identified as Dalits. Dr. Ambedkar, after his highly publicized conversion away from Hinduism, founded Navayana Buddhism, striving to dismantle caste barriers. He revisited history, reviving a lost moment against casteism, and utilized Buddhism as a tool to restore the long-denied dignity of Dalits (Tartakov 2003). It is noteworthy that Ambedkar's impetus for change primarily originated from his desire to leave Hinduism and establish a utopian social order for the downtrodden and marginalized. The establishment of Navayana Buddhism, guided by Ambedkar, prominently revolves around the principle that human distinctions should be based on individual actions rather than familial lineage, reflecting a central objective of Dalit conversions (Tartakov 2003).

This article delves into the concept of utopia that underpins Dalit conversions, as they strive for equality, liberty, and social dignity. It explores how Dalit conversions represent acts of acquiring a new social identity in contrast to their ascribed identity within the rigid social system. The article examines how Dalits navigated through this system to envision a utopian world within their new religious affiliation. The article adopts two main perspectives: first, it analyzes mass conversions of Dalits to Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, and Buddhism, and their motivations to denounce the caste order. Second, it delves into the purpose behind these conversions.

Religious Conversion and Dalits in India: A Short Background

The phenomenon of religious conversion among Dalits has a rich historical context and has been a recurrent event spanning various time periods. Dalits have consistently shown a proclivity towards adopting different religions and embracing new religious movements over an extended duration. The understanding of conversion in the Indian context has evolved across different historical epochs. Christian conversion can be traced back to as early as the first century A.D., marked by the arrival of one of Jesus' disciples in Kerala. During the medieval period, there were notable instances of mass conversions to Islam, while in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, India witnessed significant instances of 'collective conversions' to Christianity (Pickett 1933; Jenkins 2007; Caplan 1980).

The advent of Islam in India occurred shortly after its inception in the seventh century A.D, permeating various regions of the country. In the southern region, Islam made its entry through present-day Kerala, situated on the Malabar Coast in South India (Bahauddin 1992). Arab traders, who had been engaging in trade with India even before the time of Prophet Muhammad, were instrumental in spreading the religion. These traders, during their frequent voyages to the Malabar region, established marital bonds with local women, resulting in the proliferation of Islam in the area (Robinson & Clarke 2003).

Accompanying these traders were Sufi saints, whose preaching and the appeal of an egalitarian faith inspired numerous local individuals, particularly from lower social strata, to embrace Islam (Kurup 1991; Oddie 1991). It is important to note that such instances of conversion were not confined to the pre-colonial and colonial eras. For example, the Mahars of Maharashtra have undergone conversion to Buddhism, a process that persists to this day. Additionally, conversions to the Bahai faith, as well as to Jainism and Islam, have been documented among various groups (Garlington 1977; Bayly 2004).

In line with various reformist and emancipatory movements aimed at promoting egalitarianism and eradicating caste-based practices from society, Guru Nanak founded the Sikh religion. Sikhism vehemently criticized the prevailing practices of social exclusion and discrimination based on caste, offering an alternative to the existing unequal social order (Marengo 1974). The tenth guru further institutionalized the principle of equality by introducing the ceremony of *amrit or khande ka phul*, wherein participants partake of nectar from the same bowl. During the original ceremony in April 1699, several Dalit men embraced the Sikh faith and underwent the amrit initiation (Talha 2008). This significant event solidified the idea of equality within Sikhism and fostered inclusivity among its followers, transcending the barriers of caste-based discrimination.

In the post-independence era of India, there were several noteworthy cases of religious conversion. One significant instance was the mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism in 1956, spearheaded by Dr. Ambedkar. On 14 October 1956, during the auspicious occasion of Vijaya Dashmi, Dr. Ambedkar and nearly 400,000 of his followers arrived at their spiritual destination in Nagpur, Maharashtra, marking a momentous occasion in the history of Dalit empowerment and their embrace of Buddhism (Sangrakshita 1986; Rodrigues 2002; Pandey 2006). Another remarkable religious transformation occurred in 1981 in Meenakshipuram, a lesser-known village in Tamil Nadu, where hundreds of untouchables, commonly referred to as Dalits, converted to Islam (Wankhede 2009). Around 200 Dalit families participated actively in a collective conversion ceremony, symbolizing their adoption of the Islamic faith.

The Meenakshipuram conversion was shaped by a complex interplay of socio-economic and political factors. Dalits in the region had long endured social discrimination and economic marginalization entrenched within the hierarchical structure of the Hindu caste system. This deep-rooted disparity led to pervasive discontent and frustration within the Dalit community. The promise of emancipation

and improved socio-economic prospects offered by Islam served as a compelling impetus for the Dalits to pursue this mass conversion. The convergence of their profound sense of alienation with the aspirational promise of social upliftment under the Islamic framework played a pivotal role in motivating the Dalit community to embark on this transformative journey (Mathew 1982).

Furthermore, there have been recurring incidents reported in newspapers across various parts of the country regarding Dalit conversions or the threat of conversion. In 2017, more than 2,000 Dalits in Aligarh expressed their intention to convert to Islam.¹ In the same year, over 100 Dalit families in Sharanpur, Uttar Pradesh, threatened to convert to Buddhism.² Similarly, in 2019, over 3,000 Dalits in Coimbatore District, Tamil Nadu, protested against untouchability by threatening to convert to Islam.³ In Hindaun, Rajasthan, in 2019, agitated Dalits also contemplated converting to Islam.⁴ In 2022, more than 450 Dalits in Shorapur, Karnataka, took a decisive step to abandon Hinduism, seeking to shed the stigmatizing label of being considered “untouchable.”⁵ Furthermore, in 2023, forty individuals from eight Dalit families in Theni, southern Tamil Nadu, embraced Islam due to their distressing experiences of living among upper-caste Hindus.⁶ These instances are emblematic of the motivations and aspirations that lie behind religious conversions among Dalits.

The phenomenon of religious conversion among Dalits represents not merely a change in religious identity but also serves as a potent means of social empowerment and emancipation from the oppressive structures of the caste system (Kanungo 2008). The decision to convert is driven by a desire for dignity, equality, and liberation from the shackles of social hierarchy, prompting Dalits to seek refuge in alternative faiths and belief systems (Bayly 2004; Eaton 1993). These conversions reflect the agency and conscious search for meaning among Dalits as they navigate the complexities of their social environment and engage in a transformative process that transcends mere religious affiliation (Sebastian 2003). Such conversions are deeply rooted in historical and contemporary struggles for social justice, and they represent a paradigm shift from passive subjects to proactive seekers of social change and dignity (Richardson 1985).

Overall, the phenomenon of Dalit conversions in post-independence India represents a complex and dynamic interplay of socio-cultural, political, and religious factors, underscoring the significance of religious conversion as a means of striving

¹<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/over-2000-dalits-threaten-to-convert-to-islam-in-up/articleshow/58781064.cms>

²<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/dalits-threaten-to-convert-to-buddhism/article19100513.ece>

³<https://www.onmanorama.com/news/india/2019/12/27/dalits-conversion-to-islam-mettupalayam-wall-collapse-mudaliyar-coimbatore.html>

⁴<https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/sick-of-upper-caste-brutality-angry-dalits-threaten-to-convert-to-islam-in-rajasthan/310558>

⁵<https://theprint.in/india/called-untouchable-in-2022-why-hundreds-of-dalits-in-karnataka-embraced-buddhism-last-week/1170024/>

⁶<https://telanganatoday.com/eight-dalit-families-convert-to-islam-in-tn-alleging-upper-caste-atrocities>

for equality, liberty, and social dignity among marginalized communities. It serves as a transformative process that redefines not only religious identities but also societal power dynamics, ultimately contributing to a more egalitarian and inclusive social fabric (Pandey 2006).

Motivations and Aspirations behind Dalit Conversions

This section delves into the multifaceted motivations and aspirations driving Dalit conversions in post-independence India using theories from sociology, psychology, social identity perspectives. It highlights conversion as a transformative process fostering equality, liberty, and social dignity among marginalized communities.

Conversion as Social and Religious Remonstrance

The Dalit converts exhibit a notable proclivity towards embracing new religious ideologies, often engaging in collective conversion processes that center around their caste identities. These group conversions give rise to conflicts and tensions as the converts grapple with the establishment of their transformed social positions. It is essential to recognize that conversion entails not only an individual's shift in status but also a comprehensive restructuring of social dynamics. Interestingly, when discontentment arises among marginalized castes, they turn to religious expressions as a means of transcending the oppressive constraints imposed by the caste system and elevating their social standing. The pursuit of enhanced social status consistently acts as a significant driving force behind large-scale conversions, intricately intertwined with their spiritual dimensions.

According to Copley (1994), conversions from Hinduism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are the result of a multifaceted interplay of psychological, political, cultural, and often spiritual motivations. The minds of Dalits are not passive vessels awaiting external religious influences; instead, their conversions are deeply rooted in centuries of oppression, religious subjugation, and social bondage. The conversion of Dalits, marked by heightened religious consciousness and a significant departure from traditional practices, takes place despite formidable challenges. It represents not merely a radical personal transformation but rather a profound shift in social connections and behavior, as individuals abandon their previous belief systems. Dalits actively engage in planning, decision-making, and shaping their life experiences before renouncing their traditional religion. They embody proactive seekers, characterized by a sense of "autonomy" and an inherent "search for meaning" in alternative faiths.

Conversion as Process, not Event

Conversion represents a profound and intricate journey involving a process of identity transformation, engendering a utopian vision, and paving the way for an equitable society. It transcends a mere change of religious affiliation, particularly in the context of Dalit conversion. This transformative endeavor reflects their pursuit of utopian ideals, which serve as the bedrock for achieving social equality and liberation.

Heredia (2007) argues that characterizing conversion as an abrupt, isolated, and irreversible event, following the traditional passivist perspective, oversimplifies its intricate nature. Instead, it is imperative to acknowledge the necessity of a brief period of assessment and observation to comprehend the consequences of conversion for both the individual and the community. This process entails a gradual transformation of existing belief systems, wherein new sets of beliefs and practices are integrated alongside pre-existing ones, often symbolized through certain initiation rituals. Gauri Vishwanathan (2001) emphasizes the present challenge of viewing conversion not as an endpoint but as a starting point for knowledge and communication. Adopting a process-oriented perspective allows for seamless connection between the initial phase and subsequent stages, without fixating solely on the intervening events. This dynamic process unfolds fluidly, navigating complexities as it traverses from the individual to the social and from the psychological to the socio-cultural realm. For Dalits, conversion may initially stem from experiences of discrimination and injustice, evolving into a religiously motivated form of protest. Nevertheless, the transformative journey does not culminate there; rather, Dalits must assert and establish their newly acquired religious and social identities within their new religious framework. Consequently, conversion becomes an ongoing process rather than a single isolated event.

Conversion as Paradigm Shift

The conversion motivations explore the two overarching paradigms, 'activist' and 'passivist,' that have shaped the scholarly discourse on religious conversion. Focusing on the 'activist' paradigm, the study delves into its implications in understanding Dalit conversion in India. The 'passivist' paradigm perceives religious conversion as a process that happens to individuals, driven by external forces, and rooted in deterministic views of human behavior. However, a paradigm shift has been witnessed, reflecting changes in social psychology and sociology (Kuhn 1962). The 'activist' paradigm views conversion as a product of an actively engaged seeker who exercises volition and agency in embracing a new religious belief system. This perspective emphasizes the role of the convert in shaping their own identity and personhood. Conversion entails a profound shift in one's sense of ultimate grounding or core reality, leading to a paradigmatic change in behavior and religious practices (Richardson 1985). Various disciplines such as Psychology, Anthropology, Sociology, and Politics contribute to understanding conversion. The 'activist' paradigm has gained prominence in recent times, providing insights into the motivations behind religious affiliations (Snow & Machalek 1984).

Applying the 'activist' paradigm to Dalit conversion highlights the transformative role of agency in the pursuit of social and spiritual emancipation. The 'activist' paradigm deepens our comprehension of the complex interplay between individual agency and societal context in the conversion process. The 'activist' paradigm offers a nuanced and dynamic perspective on religious conversion, especially in the context of Dalit conversion in India. Acknowledging individual agency and choice as drivers of conversion underscores its transformative impact on identity.

Identity Shift: From Ascribed to Acquired

The notion of identity has undergone a significant transformation in the post-structural period, marked by a shift from ascribed to acquired identities. Political theorist Charles Taylor (1989) and psychologist Roy Baumeister (1986) have elucidated the modern shift towards subjective and customizable identities, allowing individuals to fashion their religious, educational, occupational, sexual, and domestic roles. In medieval times, identity was predominantly ascribed by societal norms, encompassing one's religion, occupation, and economic status. However, in the modern era, identities have become less deterministic and more amenable to individual choices. This shift has resulted in a revival of identity with post-modernist characteristics. The existence of acquired identities presents a critical challenge for social identity researchers, as it allows individuals the flexibility to adopt multiple identities that are not fixed. Traditional social identity theories, emphasizing group membership salience as the primary determinant of identity, may overlook the role of individual choice in shaping identity development. While social identity theory researchers often prioritize the salience of group membership in identity development, this view may be overly deterministic, neglecting the influence of individual agency. The malleability of acquired identities implies that individuals can exercise control over their self-concept and social roles (Giddens 1991).

The shift from ascribed to acquired identities holds particular relevance in the context of Dalit conversion. As Dalits embrace new religious affiliations, they exercise agency in crafting their identities beyond the constraints of the caste-based social hierarchy. The concept of salience, a key force driving identity shifts according to social identity researchers, highlights the influence of situational factors rather than fixed characteristics in shaping individual identities. This fluidity underscores the dynamic interplay between individual choice and societal dynamics. The transformation of identity from ascribed to acquired in Dalit conversion challenges conventional deterministic views and emphasizes the significance of individual agency. Understanding the complexities of acquired identities is essential for comprehending the multifaceted nature of Dalit conversion and its implications for social identity theory.

Understanding Utopian Ideals within the Context of Dalit Conversions

Dalits, who have endured historical oppression and social marginalization within the hierarchical caste system, have pursued religious conversion as a mechanism to transcend their circumstances and envisage an ideal society liberated from caste-based discrimination. Within this pursuit of utopia, religious conversion assumes a pivotal role by providing Dalits with an avenue to contest prevailing social norms and entrenched practices that perpetuate caste-based inequities. Through the process of conversion, Dalits not only acquire a new religious identity but also cultivate a

collective consciousness aimed at dismantling caste-based hierarchies and advancing principles of social justice.

Ambedkar, Conversion and Utopia

The theory and model elucidating the phenomenon of conversion in India find their most profound exposition through the lens of a prominent figure who meticulously strategized and scrutinized the conversion of Dalits for a remarkable span of twenty-one years. Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, after publicly announcing his own conversion at Yeola on 13 October 1935, firmly declared, "It was not my fault that I was born an untouchable. But I am determined that I will not die as a Hindu" (Gore 1993).

Dr. Ambedkar's perception of the social backwardness and exclusion faced by Dalits underscored the notion that such discrimination was deeply rooted in the legitimate religious sanctions of Hinduism itself. In his unwavering critique, he portrayed Hinduism as an oppressive religion, perpetuating a hierarchical system of graded inequalities that condemned Dalits to live in a state of subservience under the mercy of caste Hindus. Initially, Dr. Ambedkar embarked on a mission of reform, seeking to address the unequal and exploitative social order within Hinduism. In 1924, he founded the Bahiskrit Hithkarni Sabha, guided by the motto, "Educate, Agitate, and Organize," and launched movements of satyagraha to challenge caste oppression. Throughout this period, he pursued his agenda within the fold of Hindu culture and religion, advocating for equality through agitations demanding access to drinking water in the Chowkdar Tank campaign and various temple entry movements (Jaffrelot 2006).

However, as time passed, Dr. Ambedkar's perspective evolved, and he expressed his aspirations more assertively through his correspondence with Bahiskrit Bharat, stating, "We seek equal rights in society. We will strive to achieve them as far as possible while remaining within the Hindu fold, or if necessary, by disentangling ourselves from this futile Hindu identity" (Heredia 2007). This marked a significant shift in his approach, underscoring a growing inclination towards seeking liberation from the constraints of Hinduism and embracing a new identity as a means to attain the cherished goal of equality for Dalits in society.

Having encountered obstacles in his attempts to bring about meaningful reforms within the inflexible framework of Hindu social structure, Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar made a decision to openly renounce Hinduism. His unwavering optimism regarding the attainment of equal status for Dalits beyond the confines of the Hindu fold compelled him to reassess and refine his approach to the movement. Dr. Ambedkar firmly believed that the emancipation of Dalits lay outside the confines of Hinduism, rather than within it. His endeavor aimed at liberating Dalits by establishing their rights through political power, transcending the limitations imposed by the current religious and social order. In his speeches published later under the thought-provoking title 'Muktikonpath' (meaning the path to liberation), and by the Buddha Dhamma

Education Society of India, Dr. Ambedkar articulates his vision of a utopian state that lies in the conversion of Dalits.

According to me, this conversion of religion will bring happiness to the Dalits and to the Hindus. So long as you remain Hindu, you will have to struggle for social intercourse, for food and water and for inter-caste marriages...by conversion, the roots of the quarrel will vanish...This path of conversion is the only right path of freedom which ultimately leads to equality.⁷

Ambedkar was of the opinion that conversion would establish a utopian society based on equality, liberty and overall well-being and a happier existence (Beltz 2005). Ambedkar interrogated caste Hinduism and tunnelled a way out from it through the practise of conversion. He critically examined the structure of caste-based Hinduism and sought an escape from its confines through the act of conversion. For Ambedkar, the perpetuation of caste was an inevitable outcome of Brahmanic Hinduism, with untouchability standing as its most degrading manifestation. Therefore, he asserted that "Conversion" is of paramount significance for Dalits, just as self-government is crucial for India, as both share the same ultimate goal (Ambedkar 1989).

Ambedkar's vision of utopian Dalit conversion encompasses two crucial dimensions: the social and religious aspects, and the material and spiritual aspects. He identified sympathy, equality, and liberty as indispensable factors for individual upliftment, and viewed conversion as a transformative process, moving away from the stagnant confines of traditional beliefs and practices (Ambedkar 2004). This transformative shift, brought about by adopting a new name and religion, engenders a comprehensive change in one's identity. In elucidating the reasons behind his decision to change his religion, Ambedkar expounded further on the utopian ideals of conversion during a conference in Bombay on May 30–31, 1936. "...Convert for getting organized. Convert for becoming strong, Convert for securing equality, Convert for getting liberty, and Convert so that your domestic life may be happy."⁸

Conversion emerged as a powerful instrument of unity, organization, and emancipation for the marginalized, a theme recurrent in Dr. Ambedkar's extensive body of writings. In his seminal work "The Annihilation of Caste" (Moon 1979), he perceives caste as a complex interplay of cultural conflicts, political maneuvers, and ideological deceptions. Subsequently, in "Who were the Shudras?" he frames caste as a class struggle between the Brahmins and Non-Brahmins (Moon 1990). A more elaborate exposition of this argument is evident in "The Untouchables," where he

⁷Speech published in *'Mukti Kona Patha'* (which is the liberation path?) (Extracts of Marathi text were edited by Khairamode (caritra, vii: 87–89) and by the Buddha Dhamma Education Society of India 1992.

⁸B.R Ambedkar's written speech in Marathi at the conference held in Bombay on May 30–31, 1936. This speech was first published in the Maharashtra Government 's special Issue, 'Lok Rajya' brought out on April 16, 1981. It had been translated into English by Vasant Moon and was first published with 'Oppressed Indian', the organ of BAMCEF. Also published in the Jantak Lehar, Jalandhar (Punjab) Vol.3, No.4, April 1986.

posits that the ascendancy of Brahmanism over Buddhism resulted in the suppression and oppression of tribals and Dalits by the caste Hindus. Ambedkar further advances his ideas through works such as “Revolution and Counter Revolution” and “Buddha and Karl Marx,” forging a cohesive ideology to fortify his advocacy for Buddhism (Moon 1987, 1979). Importantly, he elucidates Buddhism as a liberation theology rather than solely a spiritual source, presenting his vision of Buddhism as Navayana.

For a distinct segment of the Dalit community, the conversion movement represents a form of protest. The underlying meanings and objectives behind Dalit conversions were centered on dismantling the hierarchical structure of the caste-based society. This entailed advocating for an egalitarian ideology and a just value-system that the society had not been founded upon, as these elements were deemed pivotal in shaping mass consciousness and identity. Hence, a dual thread of logic ran through the entire fabric of the conversion movement, emphasizing equality and self-respect. The objective was to generate a propelling force that would elevate Dalits from a position of humiliation and subordination to one of social and cultural elevation (Pillai 1982).

Dr. Ambedkar, recognizing the transformative potential of Dalit conversion, embraced Buddhism himself, marking a momentous beginning for historically oppressed and marginalized communities. He established Navayana Buddhism as a new vehicle for their emancipation and identity (Tartakov 2003). Subsequently, large numbers of Mahars and Chamars in Maharashtra and Jatavs in Uttar Pradesh embraced the utopian worldview during 1956–57 (Beltz 2005; Jaffrelot 2006). The Dalit movements denouncing Hinduism did not conclude with Ambedkar; his utopian vision continues to inspire successive generations to experience conversion. Dalits sought to shed their traditional lower caste social identity and embraced conversion as a means to embrace modernity (Gold 1994).

Significantly, these studies have consistently demonstrated that conversion constitutes a highly disruptive act capable of altering India’s demography and character. Thus, their vehement support for conversion through social organization can be regarded as justified from multiple angles. As Ambedkar espoused, conversion serves as a means to attain autonomy, challenge the prevailing status quo, and usher in a new social order. The Dalit conversion movement embodied elements of utopianism, as it sought to effect social action and instigate transformative change (Rodrigues 2002). Ambedkar and his followers staunchly asserted that the motivation and intention behind Dalit conversion were not driven by economic or political gain; rather, it served as a powerful tool of protest to secure social acceptance. This social transformation held immense potential to benefit the untouchable communities profoundly (Ambedkar 1989). Eaton, in his astute observations, challenges the prevailing assumption that Dalits were passive recipients of conversion, rather than active agents in their decision-making. He points out that Dalits made reasoned choices, incorporating elements from various religious traditions into their pre-existing utopian worldviews, thereby demonstrating thoughtful engagement rather than mere acceptance of foreign ideas (Eaton 1993). This assumes significance when examining the Dalit conversion through the lens of Dalits themselves. Their perspective encapsulates the concept of

emancipation from the entrenched caste-based subjugation, which forms a pivotal element in the aspiration to establish a utopian realm for the newly converted, facilitating a purposeful and significant existence.

Fissures in Utopia

Despite the fervent aspiration of Dalit conversion to establish an egalitarian and dignified utopian society rooted in principles of equity and self-respect, the persistent existence of caste-based prejudice and hierarchical stratification within diverse religious frameworks, including Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism, belies the professed tenets of parity and repudiation of bias. A study conducted by Louis (2007) pertaining to Scheduled Caste (SC) converts to Christianity underscores that post-conversion, the overall social and economic circumstances of ex-untouchables remain comparable to those of non-converts within the same caste thus require recognition and reservation. Notably, despite adopting Christianity, Dalit Christians remain subjected to subjugation perpetuated by caste Hindus. Evidently, the transition to Christianity did not effectuate a change in the oppressors' mindset, as they continue to subject Dalit Christians to untouchability and discrimination, often forcing them into reliance upon caste Hindus for sustenance. Throughout different historical periods, Dalit Christians encountered varying forms of discrimination and social exclusion within the Christian domain. In response, they engaged in challenges against caste-based practices both within and outside the church. Discrimination and exclusion within the church compelled them to advocate for integration, triggering conflicts between Dalit Christians and higher-caste Christians.⁹ In the context of institutional exclusion, Dalit Christians struggled for representation and equitable treatment. Despite constituting a significant portion of the Catholic population in Tamil Nadu, Dalits remain vastly underrepresented among priests, nuns, and bishops. The imbalance underscores the exclusion perpetrated by higher-caste Christians against marginalized sections of society. Depicting the same in "Karukku," Bama (in her autobiography) shares her experiences with Christianity as a Dalit woman in India. Her portrayal of Christianity is deeply intertwined with her

⁹During mass conversions and subsequent periods, Dalit Christians confronted the marginalization of their community within the church. Instances such as a legal dispute by a group of caste Christians against the Bishop of Trichiripoly in 1916 highlighted demands for caste privileges in church premises. These disputes centered around issues like separate entries, exclusive ownership of church property, and segregated seating arrangements for Dalit Christians and caste Christians. Similar incidents, such as the episode involving the celebration of 'Our Lady of Seven Dollars' festival in 1936, illustrated the tensions between different groups over traditional practices. For more read, Chandra Mallampalli, *Christians and Public life in Colonial South India, 1863-1937: Contending with Marginality*, London: Routledge Curzon, 2004; J. Massey, *India 50 years of independence: 1947-1997, Dalits: Issues and Concerns*, Delhi: B.R Publication Corp., 1998; John Webster, *Religion and Dalit Liberation: An examination of Perspectives*, New Delhi, Manohar publications, 1999; James Massey, *Dalits in India: Religion as a source of bondage or liberation with special reference to Christians*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1999; Duncan B Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, London: Curzon, 1979.

exploration of identity, social struggles, and the search for liberation from caste-based oppression (Bama 2012).

Similarly, Dalits who embraced Islam underwent a parallel experience characterized by the persistence of caste-based hierarchies and discriminatory practices that ran counter to their envisioned utopian aspirations. Prominent scholarly works by Muslim researchers have brought to light the existence of caste practices within Muslim society. Imtiaz Ahmad's influential research, "Caste and Social Stratification among Muslims in India," and Ali Anwar's recent work in Hindi, "*Masawat ki Jung: Pasemanzar Bihar ka Pasmanda Musalman*," have effectively unveiled the reality of caste among Indian Muslims.¹⁰ The grading of Ajlaf (non-Ashraf lower caste) castes is based primarily on the perceived impurity or pollution associated with their occupations, along with physical proximity to Ashraf castes during services. This hierarchical arrangement mirrors practices observed in Christianity. The discrimination against lower-caste Muslim converts has given rise to a distinct social group within Muslim society known as Dalit Muslims. A comparable scenario unfolded within the contexts of Sikhism and Buddhism, wherein the emergence of caste divisions gave rise to distinct groups known as Mazhabi Sikhs and Dalit Buddhists.

Despite Sikh doctrine's rejection of caste, caste divisions persist in social practices.¹¹ Within Sikhism, the Dalit Sikhs are bifurcated into two categories: Mazhbis

¹⁰In Northern India, the term 'Zat,' equivalent to the Hindu 'jati' or caste system, is used to denote caste. The Ashrafs and non-Ashrafs are collectively referred to as 'oonchi zat' (high caste) and 'neechi zat' (low caste) respectively. Interactions between these two groups are governed by established patron-client relationships within the jajmani system. The patrons, belonging to the high caste, are known as jajmanis, while the clients, comprising various occupational castes of the low castes, are referred to as kamin. The kamins, in a hereditary relationship with the dominant Ashraf lineage, provide specialized services to them for customary remuneration. They receive housing sites and land leases for cultivation from their jajmans. For more, Bahauddin, K.M., *Kerala Muslims: The Long Struggle*, Kottayam: Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-op society, 1992; Robinson, Rowena and Clarke, Sathianathan, (ed.) *Religious Conversions in India: Modes, Motivations and Meaning*, ND: OUP, 2003; Alam, Anwar, 'Democratisation of Indian Muslims', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 38, No. 46, November 15, p. 4881, 2003; Bhatti, Zarina, 'Social Stratification among Muslims in India', in M N Srinivas (ed.) *Caste: Its Twentieth Century Avatar*, New Delhi: Penguin, 1996.

¹¹Punjab's censuses in 1881 and 1921 listed over 25 castes within the Sikh community, encompassing Jats, Khatri, Aroras, Ramgarhias, and others. Dalit Sikhs are divided into two segments: Mazhbis (Rangretas) and Ramdasias (Ravidasias). Mazhbis, formerly Chuhras (sweepers), reside mainly in the Majha sub-region and are noted for their potential as soldiers. Rangretas are a subset of Mazhbis. Ramdasias and Ravidasias are Chamars who converted to Sikhism, with Ramdasias primarily engaged in weaving and Ravidasias in leatherwork. For more, Marengo, Ethene K., *The Transformation of Sikh Society*, Portland: HaiP press 1974; Saberwal, Satish, 'Receding Pollution: Intercaste Relations in Urban Punjab,' *Sociological Bulletin*, New Delhi, Vol. 22, No. 3, September 1973; Kaur, Ravinder, 'Jat Sikhs: A Question of Identity,' *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, New Delhi, Vol. 20, No. 2, 1986; Verma, Archana B., *The Making of Little Punjab in Canada: Patterns of Migration*, New Delhi: Sage, 2000; Ibbetson, Sir Denzil, *Punjab Castes*, Punjab: Language Department, 1883, rpt. 1970; Juergensmeyer, Mark, *Religion as a Social Vision, the Movement against Untouchability in 20th Century Punjab*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981; Juergensmeyer, Mark,

or Rangretas, traditionally engaged in scavenging and cleaning, and Ramdasias and Ravidasias, Chamars who converted to Sikhism (Puri 2004). Notwithstanding their rigorous adherence to Sikh precepts, these groups are confronted with social isolation, being excluded from religious ceremonies and maintaining a hereditary stigma. Dalit Sikhs, despite converting to Sikhism, grapple with enduring hierarchies and disparities that undermine the overarching principle of caste equality advocated by Sikh teachings.

In each of these instances, a dissonance becomes evident between the professed doctrines extolling egalitarianism and the tangible realities faced by marginalized factions, particularly Dalits or those relegated to lower castes, who remain ensnared in cycles of marginalization, exclusion, and disparate treatment within their respective religious enclaves. These religious contexts unveil an intricate interplay between theological teachings and social conduct. While religious doctrines may ardently endorse notions of parity and denounce discriminatory practices, the persistence of historical and cultural influences has engendered the perpetuation of caste-derived hierarchies and exclusionary behaviors. The ordeals encountered by Dalits within these religious settings accentuate the enduring complexities inherent in translating theological precepts into substantive societal transformation.

The emergence of 'ghar wapasi' poses an additional obstacle to the nascent realm of utopia. Initiated by Hindu revivalist organizations, spearheaded by Arya Samaj under the guidance of Dayanand Saraswati during the nineteenth century, this movement laid the groundwork for reabsorbing converted Christians and Muslims into the Hindu fold through the establishment of the Shuddhi Sabha, or Purification Council (Vandeveldt 2011). The impetus gained momentum in the early twentieth century, propelled by Swami Shradhananda's leadership in orchestrating the 'ghar wapasi' or homecoming initiatives, particularly evident in the United Province where conversions of Muslims took place (Gupta 1998). In the late 1990s, the Shuddhi movement experienced renewed vigour, with Hindu organizations embarking on the conversion and reconversion of Dalits and tribal communities under the banner of 'ghar wapasi' (Katju 2015). This process aimed to reclaim Dalits who had previously converted to Christianity and Islam, bringing them back into the fold of Hinduism. 'Ghar wapasi' not only impedes Dalit conversions to Christianity and Islam but also augments the demographic composition of Hindus. By reasserting the presence of formerly converted Hindus, particularly Dalits, during census enumerations, this phenomenon underscores the potential numerical strength of the Hindu population.

Consequently, this development poses a challenge to the conceptual framework envisioned by Dalits through the avenue of Dalit conversions, as the 'ghar wapasi' movement undermines the creation of a new utopian paradigm. Despite these dynamics, it remains noteworthy that a substantial number of Dalits continue to convert to Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam each year. Notably, Despande and Bapna's report from 2008 does not reveal significant disparities between Dalit Hindus and those who

Religion Rebels in the Punjab: The Social Vision of Untouchables, Delhi: Ajanta Pub. 1988; Ram, R., Internal Caste Cleavages among Dalits in Punjab, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 52, Issue No. 3, 21 Jan., 2017, pp. 54–57.

have converted to Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Sikhism, particularly concerning socioeconomic indicators. However, it is important to acknowledge that conversion, as explored in previous discussions, extends beyond mere pursuit of material well-being, encapsulating profound psychological and spiritual implications.

Conclusion

Religious conversion holds a significant place in the Dalit struggle for liberation and the pursuit of a casteless utopia. By embracing alternative religious identities, Dalits challenge the hierarchical structures of the caste system and envision a society founded on principles of equality and justice. The process of conversion empowers Dalits, enabling them to reclaim their agency and engage in socio-religious transformations aimed at dismantling caste-based discrimination. As Dalits continue to assert their rights and pursue their vision of utopia, religious conversion remains a crucial tool for their empowerment and emancipation. The phenomenon of Dalit conversions in India presents a compelling narrative of agency, resilience, and aspiration for a better social order. Extensive scholarly exploration reveals that conversions were not merely a response to caste-based oppression but represented a dynamic process of identity transformation. The multifaceted motivations behind conversions, ranging from seeking liberation to challenging social presumptions and pursuing desired attributes, highlight the complexity of the phenomenon. Dalits actively engaged in the conversion process, shaping their identities by embracing alternative faiths as a means of breaking free from discrimination and seeking autonomy. The Bhakti movement and the emergence of Buddhism further exemplify the efforts to challenge social hierarchies and promote egalitarianism.

The quest for a utopian society lies at the heart of Dalit conversions, providing them with a sense of equality, liberty, and social dignity. The article emphasizes that Dalit conversions should not be seen merely as a shift from one religion to another, but as a journey of acquiring a new social identity and envisioning a transformative world. The motivations and aspirations behind these conversions reflect the deeply ingrained desire for a just society, free from the shackles of caste-based discrimination. To understand the complex nature of Dalit conversions, it is essential to adopt a multidisciplinary approach that encompasses historical, sociological, psychological, and religious perspectives. Such comprehensive analysis can shed light on the intricate interplay of individual agency and broader societal forces that drive the process of conversion.

In conclusion, the phenomenon of Dalit conversions in India is a testament to the resilience of a marginalized community striving for social justice and dignity. By embracing alternative religious identities, Dalits assert their agency and actively shape their destinies. The transformative nature of conversions challenges traditional paradigms and emphasizes the multifaceted motivations behind this significant social phenomenon. Understanding the dynamics of Dalit conversions can pave the way for a more inclusive and egalitarian society, where individuals are empowered to transcend the barriers of ascribed identities and pursue the path of self-determination.

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