

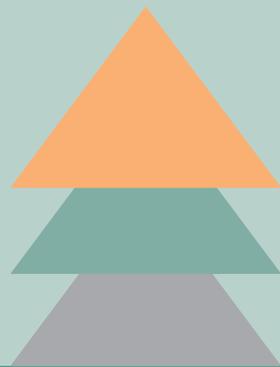
Religions and Development  
Research Programme

**Religious Mobilizations for  
Development and Social  
Change: A Comparative Study  
of Dalit Movements in Punjab  
and Maharashtra, India**

**Surinder S. Jodhka and Avinash Kumar**

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Working Paper 47 - 2010

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# Religions and Development

## Research Programme

The Religions and Development Research Programme Consortium is an international research partnership that is exploring the relationships between several major world religions, development in low-income countries and poverty reduction. The programme is comprised of a series of comparative research projects that are addressing the following questions:

- How do religious values and beliefs drive the actions and interactions of individuals and faith-based organisations?
- How do religious values and beliefs and religious organisations influence the relationships between states and societies?
- In what ways do faith communities interact with development actors and what are the outcomes with respect to the achievement of development goals?

The research aims to provide knowledge and tools to enable dialogue between development partners and contribute to the achievement of development goals. We believe that our role as researchers is not to make judgements about the truth or desirability of particular values or beliefs, nor is it to urge a greater or lesser role for religion in achieving development objectives. Instead, our aim is to produce systematic and reliable knowledge and better understanding of the social world.

The research focuses on four countries (India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Tanzania), enabling the research team to study most of the major world religions: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and African traditional belief systems. The research projects will compare two or more of the focus countries, regions within the countries, different religious traditions and selected development activities and policies.

The consortium consists of six research partner organisations, each of which is working with other researchers in the four focus countries:

- University of Birmingham, UK: International Development Department, Department of Theology and Religion, Centre for West African Studies, Centre for the Study of Global Ethics.
- University of Bath, UK: Centre for Development Studies.
- Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, New Delhi.
- Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research, Ibadan.
- University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.
- Lahore University of Management Sciences, Pakistan.

In addition to the research partners, links have been forged with non-academic and non-government bodies, including Islamic Relief.

# Religions and Development Working Paper 47

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## Summary

Analyses of social movements in India have rarely given a central place to the religious dimensions of popular mobilizations. Nevertheless, religion has been an important factor. This research focuses on the place of religion in two lower caste movements for social change in the Indian states of Punjab and Maharashtra: the Ad Dharm/Ravidasi movement among the Chamars of the Doaba sub-region of Punjab, and the neo-Buddhist movement among the Hindu Mahars of Maharashtra.

The research was carried out at the Indian Institute for Dalit Studies, New Delhi, under the auspices of an international programme of research into the relationships between religions and development. It used published historical accounts of the two movements, secondary sources and semi-structured individual and group interviews with a wide range of informants in selected, mainly urban, locations within the two regions where the movements emerged and continue to be strongest.

Dalit is a term used for the former untouchable castes of India. Both groups of Dalits faced the challenge of distancing themselves from Hinduism whilst at the same time developing a cultural and religious system that would give coherence and legitimacy to the movements that coalesced around their struggle to escape the caste system.

- In the 1940s, the Punjabi Chamars gravitated towards the teachings, gurus and places of worship (*deras*) associated with 15<sup>th</sup> century Guru Ravidas, himself a Chamar, whose writings had been included in the Sikh holy book, *Adi Granth*.
- In the 1950s, the Maharashtra Mahars, under the leadership of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, converted to Buddhism and became known as neo-Buddhists.

Both movements thus attacked and criticized the Hindu religion for supporting the practice of untouchability and the caste hierarchy. However, rather than pursuing a secular approach, they assumed a religious character.

The research demonstrates that both movements

- were made possible by changes introduced first by the colonial rulers, which opened up new occupations for landless agricultural labourers and made educational opportunities available to Dalits, and later by the commercialization of agriculture and services, which undermined the links between caste, occupation and economic and political dominance.

- emerged within Dalit communities and were led by newly educated and globally travelled leaders who, despite having moved out of the caste-based occupational structure, had themselves experienced untouchability and the humiliations that went with it.
- sought radical changes to the caste system rather than reforms, requiring not just political changes but also a means of escape from old to new social identities
- were essentially identity movements, although both have largely remained movements of single caste groups of ex-untouchables.
- had leaders to whom rejecting caste meant rejecting Hinduism, but not religion itself – instead they sought an alternative religious system that could fulfil spiritual needs, provide an alternative identity and restore dignity to their followers.
- chose and then invested material and cultural resources in developing a distinctive religious ideology, rituals and places of worship and pilgrimage.
- established facilities to improve access to social services for community members, especially educational and employment opportunities.
- have mobilized a wide and devoted following amongst members of their communities of origin.

However, there are also some differences between them. In particular, because the neo-Buddhist movement has sought to convert Hindus, it has had to work harder to develop a religious ideology with wide appeal, and has to some extent developed into a pan-Indian religious movement. In contrast, members of the Ad Dharm/Ravidasi movement come largely from within a single caste group.

In India, where caste and religion have been the primary sources of identity and social/cultural organization, and have often been critical for the distribution of material resources and state patronage, movements of the socially marginalized have to engage with religion. They have used it instrumentally to achieve social change, political influence and increased prosperity, but it clearly also has both transcendental/ spiritual significance for its adherents and symbolic value as a source of a dignified social identity.

Some implications for movements for progressive social change for ex-untouchable caste groups within Hinduism are:

- Political influence and legal/policy change are necessary but not sufficient to overcome deeply engrained systems of discrimination and prejudice.
- For many, rejection of the caste system implies rejection of Hinduism, but because religion plays an important role in people's spiritual wellbeing and everyday lives, religions that reject caste can provide an alternative source of meaning, identity and dignity.
- While leadership is important, investment in the development of spiritual and material religious resources is also needed to secure understanding of, allegiance to and the continued vitality of 'new' religious traditions.
- In addition, investment in social facilities, especially education, serves multiple functions, including improved access to employment opportunities and healthcare.

## Glossary

<i>Ad Dharm:</i>	Literally, the ancient religion. Dalits in Punjab and other parts of India claim to be the original inhabitants (Ad Dharmis) of the land and believe that their religion is different from the Hindus, who are said to have come from outside (the Aryans).
<i>Amrit Bani:</i>	Sacred verses sung in the morning.
<i>Arya Samaj:</i>	A right-wing Hindu reformist organization active in Punjab and elsewhere in India during the first half of the 20 <sup>th</sup> century.
<i>Baba:</i>	Old man. Also used for saints.
<i>Babasaheb:</i>	Popular title used for B.R. Ambedkar to denote respect.
<i>Bahiskrit Bharat:</i>	A journal started by B. R. Ambedkar, literally India of the depressed classes
<i>Bahujan:</i>	The majority population of non-twice-born Hindus
<i>Balutedar:</i>	Member of a service caste
<i>Balutedari:</i>	Traditional system for distributing farm produce to the dependent service castes in return for their services.
<i>Bhakti:</i>	Literally devotion. Refers to various religious movements during the 14 <sup>th</sup> and 15 <sup>th</sup> centuries when, against the Brahmanical code, individual saints insisted that God does not discriminate on caste lines and anyone can relate to/access him through their devotion.
<i>Biradari:</i>	Kinship group.
<i>Chaitya Bhoomi:</i>	Sacred ground where B.R. Ambedkar was cremated
<i>Chamar:</i>	An 'ex-untouchable' caste traditionally identified with leather work.
<i>Dalit:</i>	Literally means oppressed/downtrodden. During the 1990s, it became a 'politically correct' term for the ex-untouchable communities, the Scheduled Castes of India.
<i>Dargah:</i>	Place of prayer for Sufis.
<i>Deeksha:</i>	Preparing for a religious ceremony.
<i>Dera:</i>	A religious centre usually identified with a specific guru.
<i>Dhamma:</i>	The teachings of the Buddha
<i>Ek-Aunkar:</i>	First word of the Sikh holy book, meaning God is one.
<i>Faqeer:</i>	Sufi saints
<i>Gadar Movement:</i>	An early 20 <sup>th</sup> century left-wing movement of Indian workers working in Western countries.

<i>Guru/Adi Granth:</i>	The Sikh holy book.
<i>Guru:</i>	A mentor, a wise person, who guides man to the path of God.
<i>Gurudwara:</i>	The religious place of worship of the Sikh community.
<i>Gurumukhi:</i>	The script used for writing Punjabi.
<i>Har:</i>	A Punjabi word meaning God, used by Ravidasis as a religious symbol.
<i>Hindutva:</i>	Right-wing Hindu identity politics.
<i>Jajman:</i>	Land-owning patron.
<i>Kamin:</i>	Dependent or client caste.
<i>Khalistan:</i>	Literally, land of Khalsas, a separate nation-state of the Sikhs.
<i>Langar:</i>	Community kitchen where food is served free to all in Sikh gurudwaras.
<i>Mandal:</i>	Association.
<i>Manusmriti:</i>	The Hindu law book believed to have been written by Manu.
<i>Moksha:</i>	Salvation.
<i>Navayana:</i>	A new path.
<i>Neo-Buddhists:</i>	The Mahar Dalits who converted to Buddhism under the influence of B.R. Ambedkar in Maharashtra during the second half of the 20 <sup>th</sup> century.
<i>OBC:</i>	Other Backward Classes.
<i>Poona Pact:</i>	A compromise reached between Gandhi and Ambedkar on the question of giving separate electorates/representation to the Scheduled Castes.
<i>Qaum:</i>	A nation/community
<i>Ram Rjaya:</i>	A utopia considered as the golden period of the Hindu Kingdom when the king was the Hindu God, Rama.
<i>Sant:</i>	A Saint.
<i>SC:</i>	Scheduled Castes; ex-untouchable Castes.
<i>ST:</i>	Scheduled Tribes.
<i>Vatan:</i>	Agricultural land exempt from tax, often given to dependent castes for cultivation in return for their services.

# 1 Introduction

Religion *can* help to keep everything in its place. But it can also turn the world upside-down (Smith, 1996, p. 1).

## 1.1 Introduction

In the mainstream discourse on development and modernization produced during the 1950s and 1960s, religion was generally conceptualized in negative terms, often viewed as hindering efforts to ensure the progress and development of the 'pre-modern' societies of the Third World. Such notions of development worked with the popularly held assumptions of modernization theory, which suggested that religious worldviews and the framework of values and beliefs they provided could only help such pre-modern communities reproduce their 'traditional' ways of life, invariably regarded as characterized by hierarchy and patriarchal authority. The decline of religion, or its privatization, followed by the institutionalization of a rational value system, and the secularization of public life, were thus believed to be imperatives for a society to become developed and modern (see Hoselitz, 1960; Inkeles and Smith, 1975).

It was not only the mainstream functionalist theories of modernization and social change that looked at religion in negative terms, radical and left-wing thinkers too suspected the role of religious sentiment in the human endeavour for progress. Karl Marx, for example, famously described religion as the 'opium of the masses', something that ensured that those on the margins of social and economic power remained contained and uncritical of exploitative structures of authority and economic production.

Over the last three decades or so such theories of social change have been extensively criticized and have, more or less, been abandoned. It is now widely recognized that religion is not merely a source of conservatism and stability, but that it can also be a force for disruption and change. Students of social movements have repeatedly pointed to the fact that religion has always been an important source of inspiration for people to mobilize – sometimes to resist change and, at other times, to demand social change and reform. The symbolic resources of religion are available not only to those in power, but also to the weak, who sometimes deploy them in their struggles for a secure and dignified life, which can in turn subvert the traditional or establish new structures of authority.

This change in the attitude of the social sciences towards religion can also be seen in trends in empirical research on the subject. Over the last two or three decades, there has been a steady shift

away from treating religion uncritically and in a de-contextualized fashion (Beckford, 1990; 2001; Casanova, 2001; Smith, 1996). However, much of the available scholarly literature on religion, and also the popular discourses about it, tend to look at the so-called 'grand religious traditions', Christianity, Islam or Hinduism, rather than the 'little traditions'. The contemporary revival of religion in post 9/11 global politics also refers to these grand, civilizational religious systems (as reflected, for example, in Samuel Huntington's thesis on *The Clash of Civilizations*, 1996). The internal dynamics of and movements for change within religious traditions located at the margins of these 'grand traditions' have been less discussed or researched. Historical experience shows that those who are socially excluded and marginalized struggle not only for equity and entitlements but also for cultural and symbolic resources, of which religion is an important source.

It is with this sociological perspective that the religious social movements of some of the marginalized sections of Indian society will be studied, in order to examine the role such movements have played in bringing about social change for a better life for those on the margins.

## 1.2 Social movements for development and change

India has had a long history of vibrant social and political mobilizations. These popular movements have been extensively researched by students of Indian society. Starting from the nationalist struggles for freedom from British colonial rule to the ongoing mobilizations of marginal groups, social scientists of all shades and disciplines have written on these movements. Social movements have also become part of everyday life in contemporary India, often seen as evidence and reflection of the deepening of democracy in a Third World country marked by rigid hierarchies and social disparities.

However, students of South Asian societies have often expressed their dissatisfaction with the available theoretical writings emanating from the Western academy. As has been pointed out by Kirmani, theories on contemporary social movements have been "largely formulated in relation to the experience of Northern industrialized countries, and hence, are often lacking in perspectives from Southern-based social movements" (Kirmani, 2008, p. 5). This is true not only of the early sociological traditions that looked at social movements from the then popular functionalist perspectives, which were invariably pre-occupied with 'social order' and where social movements appeared as instances of collective deviant behaviour, or social responses to systemic strains, but also of the more recent and 'radical' writing on 'new social movements' (NSM).

The Western literature on social movements tends to make a clear distinction between 'old' and 'new' social movements. The old movements were class-based mobilizations, particularly of the "industrial working class with its socialistic, communistic and anarchistic tendencies" (Hebrles cited in Mukherji, 1977, p. 44). New Social Movements (NSM) are associated with the post-industrial economy, and are considered to be inspired by identity-related issues and more cultural in their orientation. Their objective is to establish new forms of identity and cultural meaning. NSM researchers in the West have typically worked on "urban social struggles, environmental or ecological movements, women's and gay liberation, the peace movement, and cultural revolt linked primarily to student and youth activism" (Boggs quoted in Pichardo, 1997, p. 413)

Though the notions of 'old' and 'new' have also been used by students of social movements in India (Guha, 1989; Omvedt, 1993, 1998, 2003a; Singh, 2001; Wignaraja, 1993), this distinction does not make much sense in the Indian context. For example, a large variety of social movements emerged during the colonial period. While they have invariably been subsumed under the broad category of 'freedom struggle', not all derived their motivation from anti-colonial sentiment or the nationalist movement. For example, the anti-Brahmin movements of the south (Pandian, 1996), the neo-Buddhist/Dalit movement in Maharashtra (Beltz, 2005; Guru and Chakravarty, 2005; Joshi, 1986; Omvedt, 1976, 1994; Wilkinson and Thomas, 1972; Zelliot, 1977; Zelliot and Macy, 1980), Buddhist movements among the Tamils (Aloysius, 1998), the Satnami movement in Chhattisgarh (Dube, 1992, 1993) and the Ad Dharma movement in Punjab (Juergensmeyer, 1979, 1988) and elsewhere in the sub-continent, did not directly become part of the nationalist struggle. While there were several class-based movements and political struggles aligned with the nationalist movements (see Desai, 1955), not all were 'old' social movements in the classical sense of the term. The nationalist struggle itself could be described as an identity movement. Similarly the regional movements were driven by a desire for cultural autonomy and a separate ethnic identity.

Notwithstanding the differences of contexts and concepts, as a distinct area of research with its own conceptual frameworks and theoretical categories, studies on social movements in India have closely followed trends in the Western academy. Alongside its emergence in a Western context, the professional study of social movements gained popularity in India during the late 1960s and 1970s.<sup>1</sup>

Prior to this, a few sociologists who studied social movements, for example Desai (1955), promoted it as a valid area for sociological/anthropological enquiry; however, it did not receive wide professional recognition.

The research lies on the borders between the disciplines of sociology/social anthropology, political science and social history.

Until around the late 1960s, social anthropologists in India remained pre-occupied with studies of the traditional social order of the village, caste and kinship. The process of development and change was viewed primarily as an area of interest for economists. With declining interest in 'village studies' during the late 1960s and some important theoretical shifts in the discipline of sociology in the West, the orientation of scholars working on Indian society changed. The processes of change initiated by development planning, which was introduced by the post-colonial Indian state, also began to show results on the ground. Moreover, the democratic political process began to acquire local flavours and started influencing traditional hierarchical structures. The process of 'deepening' democracy began to transform local institutions such as castes into political communities (Kothari, 1970; Rudolph and Rudolph, 1987). The study of social movements also gained currency during this period. However, because of their disciplinary locations, students of social movements during this period mostly worked within Western frameworks, particularly structural functionalism and Marxist class analysis.

As in the West during the 1970s, Indian social sciences experienced a paradigm shift during the 1980s. Modernist theoretical perspectives gave way to a variety of post-modernist ways of imagining the world. Although not everyone in the social sciences converted to these new ways of looking at things, their presence was felt everywhere, bringing about a perceptible change in the political and social science discourse. Subjects such as social and economic inequalities, rural development or agrarian change were no longer fashionable among researchers. The new paradigm focused on categories like culture, identity and citizenship and students of social movements shifted their focus to questions about the environment, gender, ethnicity and other forms of identity (Jodhka, 2001).

In some ways, these shifts were also the outcomes of developmental processes. Development produced new interest groups and new disparities. Some communities and groups felt marginalized or threatened by the processes of change. Processes of social and economic mobility produced new

middle classes from amongst the historically marginal and excluded groups. The question of identity and citizenship acquired a new meaning for those who had always lived on the periphery of Indian society. Omvedt is perhaps right when she argues that the most important shift in movement politics during this period was conceptual: although 'identity' replaced 'class' in the politics of marginal groups, they continued to talk about social and economic inequalities and the oppressive structures inherited from the past (Omvedt, 1993, p. xv). A similar point has also been made by Ramachandra Guha in relation to environmental movements. He argues that the "dominant thrust of the environmental movement in India focuses on questions of production and distribution within human society". Thus, the concern in the Indian context is with "the use of environment and who should benefit from it; not with environmental protection for its own sake" (Guha, 1997, as quoted in Ray and Katzenstein, 2005, p.11).

### 1.3 Religion, caste and social movements for change

Although the mainstream discussions and writings on social movements in India have rarely given centrality to the religious dimensions of popular mobilizations, religion has been an important factor in at least three different sets of social movements in India. First, the reform movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries focused primarily on socio-religious issues. Most of these movements, even when mobilizing for reforms within their communities, actively used a religious idiom (Drene, 1991; Dua, 1970; Fuchs, 1965, 1967; Jones, 1979; Oberoi, 1994; Oddie, 1977; Paul, 1989). These movements had two dimensions. First, they were identity movements with a clear focus on the mobilization of a community or a section of the community for recognition in the political formations emerging under colonial rule, in which groups were increasingly being represented on the basis of their religious identity (Grewal, 1989). The second dimension of these movements was reformist: along with mobilization for recognition of their identity, their leaders pressed for internal reforms in the cultural and religious practices of their communities, especially reforms in traditional practices relating to women and children. Some also set up schools and faith-based organizations to work for the poor and marginalized.

The second set of social movements in which religion is a prominent feature was the 'religious revivalist' and identity movements of the 1980s and after. The most important movement in this category is the Khalistan movement among the Sikhs of Punjab, which has been well studied (Gupta,

1982; Juergensmeyer, 1993; Singh, 2000). Equally well studied have been the politico-religious mobilizations of right wing Hindutva groups (Baber, 2000; Hansen, 1999; Jaffrelot, 1996; Kanungo, 2002; Katju, 2003; Ludden, 1996; Sarkar, 1999; Zavos, 2000). Relatively less studied has been the separatist movement among the Muslims of Kashmir (Bose, 2003).

Religion in India is closely tied to caste. This is particularly so with Hinduism. Thus, the third set of social movements in which religion has been invoked are the movements for social change of Dalits and other marginalized caste communities. The core defining feature of caste, the idea of 'pollution', finds its legitimacy in Hindu religious texts and rituals. The practice of untouchability and the hierarchical social order are directly derived from the opposition of purity and impurity (Dumont, 1998). While the social movements of the subordinated caste communities have attacked and criticized the Hindu religion, they have also invariably assumed a religious character. This has been well articulated by Anand Teltumbde, a well-known Dalit intellectual, in the following words:

All anti-caste movements ... from the beginning to the present invariably appear [to be] engaged in religious or metaphysical confrontation with Brahminism, either in terms of its denouncement or [the] adoption of some other religion. The religious discourse is thus a common feature of all the anti-caste movements... they all signify an overriding hatred for the religious code of Manu<sup>2</sup> and a proposition of an alternate faith for themselves. It essentially embodied dejection with the Brahminism, which was perceived to be the root cause for their sufferings.<sup>3</sup>

As discussed above, the better known in this category of social movements were the anti-Brahmin movements in the South of India (Pandian, 1996), the neo-Buddhist/Dalit movement in Maharashtra (Beltz, 2005; Guru and Chakravarty, 2005; Joshi, 1986; Omvedt, 1976, 1994; Wilkinson and Thomas, 1972; Zelliott, 1977; Zelliott and Macy, 1980), Buddhist movements among the Tamils (Aloysius, 1998), the Satnami movement in Chhattisgarh (Dube, 1992, 1993) and the Ad Dharma movement in Punjab (Juergensmeyer, 1979, 1988) and elsewhere in India.

In a country like India, where caste and religion have been the primary source of identity and social/cultural organization, engagement with religion becomes even more critical for the socially marginalized. Apart from its symbolic value as a source of dignified social identity, at times religion also becomes critical for the distribution of material resources and state patronage. In other words, apart from their spiritual and transcendental dimension, there is also an instrumental and directly

political dimension in these movements. The existing literature convincingly shows that they have produced profound social, political and economic changes in the traditional social order, in some cases significantly raising the social and economic status of erstwhile marginalized groups (see Dube, 1993; Hardgrave, 1969; Juergensmeyer, 1979).

## **1.4 The focus of this study**

This study builds on our earlier work, in which we mapped the relationships between religion, politics and governance in India (see Mahajan and Jodhka, 2009). The earlier study looked at the manner in which marginalized sections within selected religious communities have mobilized themselves politically to get their development concerns inserted in the governance agenda of the state and the ways in which they have made use of the spaces opened up by democracy to their advantage. It found that not only did marginalized groups make instrumental use of religious resources to pursue the specific interests of their communities, but also that they viewed religion positively, as an essential aspect of their notion of wellbeing, even when they criticized dominant religions, such as Hinduism. Following the earlier study, we chose two religious movements within Dalit communities (the Scheduled Castes or ex-untouchables) in Punjab and Maharashtra, the States in which the earlier work had been undertaken. While Punjab and Maharashtra vary in size and religious demography, they both have a long history of religious social mobilizations and both witnessed vibrant reform movements in different religious communities during the colonial period. Even since independence, religion has been a very active force in the social and political life of the two States. Their Dalit communities have some interesting similarities and differences. While the proportion of Scheduled Caste people is much larger in Punjab than Maharashtra, in both States, there have been powerful autonomous social and political movements. In addition, processes of economic mobility and occupational diversification have been quite significant.

The present study focuses on two important religious movements among the Dalits of the two States: the Ad Dharm/Ravidasi movement among the Chamars of the Doaba sub-region of Punjab, and the movement for Neo-Buddhist conversions among the Hindu Mahars of Maharashtra. The study analyses their quest for a dignified social existence and their struggle for material development and empowerment through religious mobilization. Although in some senses, they are contemporary

religious movements, they originated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and have had far-reaching impacts on the social, economic and religious life of the two communities.

The specific questions that the study investigates are:

- i) What are the wider social, religious and political contexts in which the two religious movements originated?
- ii) How and why did they foreground a religious idiom or format in their political struggles for dignity and equal rights?
- iii) Who were the leaders and participants in these religious movements and what were their credentials as religious figureheads?
- iv) How have their strategies and alliances changed over time?
- v) What were their ideological motivations?
- vi) What was their attitude towards religious ideology? Was religion simply used instrumentally or was it central to participants' notion of wellbeing?
- vii) How did the process of building a religious community help the movements achieve development objectives? In other words, what have the effects of religious mobilizations been in terms of concrete institutional outcomes and economic development of the communities/participants?
- viii) What is the current status of these groups? Have they been successful in organizing themselves into distinct religious communities?

## 1.5 Methodology and data collection

Social movements have typically been studied using qualitative research techniques. Given the fluid and dynamic nature of the phenomenon, it is hard to study them through surveys, which are considered appropriate for obtaining a static picture. Also issues like leadership, participation and ideology can be best studied through qualitative techniques.

This study is therefore based on qualitative data, mainly collected through one-to-one interviews with relevant informants, some group interviews and also 'non-participant' observation in the two settings. Most of our respondents were members of the communities we studied. Though many of them had participated in one or other movement as leaders or ordinary activists, they were not uncritical supporters, and we used our critical judgement to make sense of what was being reported to us. Such

critical observation and assessment is an important component of qualitative research. Although we conducted interviews in some rural settings, most of our respondents were from urban centres. In Punjab these were Jalandhar and Phagwara, as well as neighbouring Ravidasi Deras, who were generally located in rural settings (a total of 48 interviews); while in Maharashtra, the research was mainly carried out in Solapur, Pune and Mumbai, as well as in some neighbouring centres of Neo-Buddhist activism (39 interviews).

We also did a few case studies of development-related institutions set up by the community in each setting. In the case of Punjab, we studied all three institutions set up by the Ravidas movement. However, in Maharashtra the neo-Buddhist movement has been quite dispersed across the State, so we chose three institutions established in the three urban centres where we conducted our research. Fieldwork was spread over a period of around eight months between September 2008 and April 2009, during which we spent around 30 days in each of the two sites.

Given the immense urge for publicity among activists and participants in the movements, we faced little difficulty in finding respondents. Though some of the active members were difficult to locate, or simply did not have time for us, there was virtually no hesitation in being interviewed. The only person who refused to speak to us was the head of a parallel Ravidasi Dera in the neighbourhood of Jalandhar in Punjab (see Appendix 1 for a list of respondents).

Most of the interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder, with the informed consent of the respondents. Two respondents in Maharashtra, both 'outsiders' (non-participants in the movement), showed hesitation and did not want their interviews to be recorded. Our lack of knowledge of local languages was not a serious problem in the fieldwork. Nearly all our respondents could communicate in Hindi and some could also speak English. However, many preferred to respond to our questions in their local language. Since neither of us could speak and fully understand Marathi (the local language of Maharashtra), we took help from a local researcher, who also doubled up as translator and helped with transcriptions of the Marathi interviews. The remaining interviews were transcribed with the help of research assistants in Delhi. Since one of us could speak and understand Punjabi we faced no language problem in Punjab.

Alongside the interviews, we used the available historical literature and other secondary material, including relevant documents and other materials on the two social movements, including internal publications and videos, as well as reports by affiliated organizations.

Although we interacted with a cross-section of people from the two communities studied, our respondents were mostly from these communities. It was beyond the scope of this study to interview 'outsiders' (i.e. members of other communities who might be indifferent or hostile to the movements). This could be an interesting subject for further research.

## **1.6 Structure of the report**

After this introduction to the study, we have two main sections, on the Ravidasis movement in Punjab and the neo-Buddhist movement in Maharashtra. The concluding chapter attempts to identify points of comparison between the two movements and draws some general conclusions.

## 2 Caste and Dalit religious movements: the Ravidasis of Punjab

The history of the Ravidasi movement in Punjab can be divided into three broad overlapping phases: its origins in the Ad Dharm movement during the colonial period, its evolution since the 1940s into the Ravidasi movement, and trends in the 1990s. The emergence and decline of the Ad Dharm movement and its lasting results for the community identified as Ad Dharmis are described in the first section below. The evolution of the Ad Dharm movement into the Ravidasi movement, including its earlier religious roots, physical focus in the Dera Ballan, and contemporary characteristics, is discussed in Sections 2.2 to 2.4. Its wider global and national spread is noted in Sections 2.5 and 2.6, and some of the welfare and development associated with the religious movement examined in Section 2.7.

### 2.1 The historical context

Though caste has often been viewed as a pan-Indian reality, its social composition varies significantly across regions, shaped by local historical specificities and material conditions.

Of all the States of the Indian union, Punjab has the highest proportion of Scheduled Castes (SCs). Against the national average of around 16 per cent, in Punjab, according to the 2001 Census, nearly 29 per cent of the population was listed as SC.<sup>4</sup> The proportion of SCs in the population of Punjab has also increased more rapidly than in India as a whole. In 1971, the proportion of SC population in the State was 24.7 per cent, increasing to 26.9 per cent in 1981 and 28.3 per cent in 1991, although by only 0.6 percentage points by 2001. Another interesting feature of the SC population of the State is that it is concentrated in some pockets/districts. In the prosperous Doaba sub-region, for example, over 35 per cent of the population in 2001 was SC, much larger than the State average, and in the district of Nawanshahr, in the Doaba region, 40.5 per cent of the population was SC.

The religious demography of Punjab has always been very different from the country as a whole. The majority of its population (nearly 60 per cent) identifies with Sikhism, a religion that theologically decries caste. Prior to the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, more than half of the Punjab identified with Islam, which similarly decries caste. Nevertheless, caste-based divisions and differences have been quite prominent in the region. More than a quarter of the State's population has been treated as 'out-caste' by the historically dominant sections of Punjabi society. Caste was not simply an ideological reality. It also shaped land relations and conditioned the entitlements and rights of

communities, with Dalits being invariably among the most deprived, socially, culturally and economically.

Beginning in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Punjab, particularly the eastern or Indian Punjab, has also witnessed active Dalit politics. The trajectory of Dalit politics in Punjab can be located in the changing socio-economic and political scenario after the establishment of colonial rule in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Though British colonial rule came to Punjab late, its influence grew quite rapidly. The British established canal colonies, which helped agricultural growth in the region. Colonial rule also led to the development of urban centres. Jalandhar was one such town, which experienced significant growth after it was chosen as the location of a military cantonment to recruit soldiers from the region. The colonial army provided new employment opportunities for the children of Punjabi peasants and also opened up avenues for social mobility for a section of local Dalits, particularly the Chamars, who worked with leather.

The cantonment led to increased demand for leather goods, particularly boots and shoes for the British army. As elsewhere in the subcontinent, much of the leather trade in the region was controlled by Muslim traders. However, at the local or village level, it was the 'untouchable' Chamars who supplied the raw animal skins. Some of them were quick to exploit the new opportunities being offered to them by the changing world. Not only did they move out of their villages but they also ventured out to other parts of the subcontinent and abroad, to the United States, Canada and England. However, the local leather trade remained under the control of Muslim traders – for example, two local Chamars who tried to set up businesses in Jalandhar failed and had to move to Calcutta to do so. The social and economic mobility that some individual untouchables experienced during this period prepared the ground for the political mobilizations of Dalits in the region.

The introduction of representational politics by the colonial rulers also produced a new grammar of communities in India. The colonial administrative structure deployed new categories of social aggregation and classification. The British thought of their populace in terms of religious communities and looked at them similarly in the process of governance. They “encouraged the members of each community to present their case in communitarian terms” (Grewal, 1989, p.195). As is well known to students of Indian history, the Colonial Census and its classification of the population into categories

that made sense to the alien rulers played a critical role in converting fuzzy boundaries of difference into well-defined communities (Breckenridge and van der Veer, 1993; Cohn, 1996; Dirks, 2001). Though the British came to Punjab only around the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this process of new identity formation and the restructuring of communities became pronounced in the region fairly early through social reform movements among the Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims (Fox, 1985; Oberoi, 1994).

Anxiety about numbers among the neo-religious elite of the Hindus and Sikhs also had important implications for the Punjabi Dalits. Through the newly launched social reform movements, the Hindu and Sikh leaders began to work with Dalits. In Punjab, the right wing Hindu reformist organization Arya Samaj started a *shudhi* movement wherein it encouraged 'untouchables' to 'purify' themselves and become part of mainstream Hinduism. It also encouraged Dalits to send their children to schools being run by the Samaj. Similarly, the Sikh reformers began to publicly decry caste and it was mainly through a claim to castelessness that they argued for the distinctiveness of Sikhs from Hindus (see Jodhka, 2000).

It was in this context that the Ad Dharm (literally meaning ancient religion or faith) movement emerged. Though the idea had already begun to take shape during the early 1920s, it took off only with the arrival of Mangoo Ram, who was the son of an enterprising Chamar from Maguwal village in the Hoshiarpur district of the Doaba sub-region of Punjab. As was typical in rural Punjab during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, his Dalit family had to bear the stigma of untouchability and social exclusion. However, Mangoo Ram's father was very enterprising and had been able to make some money through the leather trade.

Like some others of his caste community, Mangoo Ram acquired a 'secular' or basic education in a school run by the Arya Samaj. Migration to the West had already begun to be seen in the Doaba sub-region of Punjab as a desirable way of achieving social and cultural mobility. Mangoo Ram's father raised some money and sent him to the United States of America for paid work. While in California, Mangoo Ram was influenced by the left-wing ideas of his contemporaries from Punjab and got involved with the Gadar movement.<sup>5</sup> He came back to Punjab in 1925 with the intention of working with his own people. On returning home, he set up a school for lower-caste children with the help of the Arya Samaj, but very soon distanced himself from the Samaj and joined hands with some other members of his own community, who were trying to initiate an autonomous identity movement among the local Dalits (for details see Juergensmeyer, 1988).

The Ad Dharm movement saw itself as a religious movement. Its proponents suggested that 'untouchables' were a separate *qaum*, a distinct religious community similar to the Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, and argued that they should be treated as such by the rulers. Invoking the then popular 'racial-origin' theories of caste, they argued that Ad Dharm had always been the religion of the Dalits and that the *qaum* had existed from time immemorial (*ibid*, p. 45). Despite stiff opposition from the local Hindu leadership, the colonial Census of 1931 listed the Ad Dharmis as a separate religious community. In the very first conference of the organization, they declared:

We are not Hindus. We strongly request the government not to list us as such in the census. Our faith is not Hindu but Ad Dharm. We are not a part of Hinduism, and Hindus are not a part of us (cited in *ibid*, p. 74).

Though Ad Dharm claimed the status of a separate religion, as we will discuss below, it did not evolve as a religious movement. The aim of defining Ad Dharm as a separate religion, a *qaum*, was to determine the identity of the community and to mark its autonomy from Hinduism. As a separate *qaum*, Ad Dharmis, at least theoretically, dissolved their caste identity and argued that they should be identified as a religious community. Thus, they were no longer positioned in the system of a caste hierarchy, which was believed to make them part of Hinduism. This dissolution of their caste identity also entitled them to being recognized by the colonial state as being equal to other *qaums*, the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. Mangoo Ram expected to bring other untouchable communities into the fold of Ad Dharm and for it to emerge as a viable community at the regional level.

A total of 418,789 persons reported themselves as Ad Dharmis in the 1931 Punjab Census, almost equal to the Christian populace of the province. They accounted for about 1.5 per cent of the total population and around a tenth of the total low-caste population of the province. Nearly 80 per cent of the low castes of Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur districts reported themselves as Ad Dharmis (*ibid*, p. 77).

How were they religiously different from Hinduism, Islam or Sikhism? The Ad Dharm movement succeeded in mobilizing the Chamars of the Doaba region and in instilling a new sense of confidence amongst them. Though the movement had emerged for purely political and instrumental reasons, its members did start to evolve a religious worldview of their own, which would distinguish them from Hinduism. Though they did not identify with the Sikh religion, they looked towards it for alternative sources of a religious and ritual life. Dalits had in any case never been given the status of 'full

members' by the custodians of the Hindu religion in Punjab or elsewhere. Sikhism was easier to engage with, not only because it theologically opposed caste, but also because the Sikh holy book, the Guru Granth, included the writings of a Chamar saint, Guru Ravidas. Nonetheless, although they would have had reasons for converting to Sikhism, they chose not to do so.

Much of the subaltern religiosity in Punjab had in any case been syncretic in nature, consisting of the Deras and Dargah of *sants*, *babas* and *faqeers*. It was these shrines of the 'little traditions' that shaped the religious landscape of those living on the margins of Punjabi society in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Among them were the Deras of Ravidasi gurus, who were themselves from untouchable families but had gained some respectability in the wider society and were seen to possess spiritual prowess by their followers and admirers. It was these Deras of the Ravidasi gurus that emerged as sites of popular religious life for the Dalits of Punjab.

The Ad Dharmis are today among the most prosperous and educated of the Dalit communities in India and are far ahead of other Dalit communities in Punjab (see Table 3.1).

**Table 1: The educational levels of Scheduled Caste communities in Punjab**

Category	Below Primary	Primary	Middle	Matric/ Intermediate etc.	Non-technical & Technical diploma etc.	Graduate and above
Ad Dharmi	21.0	30.7	18.7	25.8	0.7	3.0
Balmiki	30.9	33.5	17.2	16.8	0.2	1.3
Mazhabi	37.0	32.5	14.0	14.5	0.3	0.7
All SCs	28.9	31.6	16.8	20.3	0.5	2.0

Source: Census of India 2001 [http://censusindia.gov.in/Tables\\_Published/SCST/dh\\_sc\\_punjab.pdf](http://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/dh_sc_punjab.pdf) (accessed May 30, 2009).

However, despite its success, the movement could not maintain its momentum for very long and began to dissipate soon after its grand success in 1931. According to popular understanding, the decline of the Ad Dharm movement can be attributed to its success. Its leaders joined mainstream politics. Mangoo Ram himself, along with some of his close comrades, became a member of the Punjab Legislative Assembly. The caste issue was gradually taken over by the emerging pan-Indian Dalit movement and finally merged with it. The Ad Dharm Mandal began to see itself as a social and religious organization and in 1946 decided to change its name to Ravidas Mandal, “entrusting the political work to the All India Scheduled Castes Federation in conformity with the rest of India” (see Juergensmeyer, 1988, p. 153).

## 2.2 From Ad Dharm to Ravidasi

A closer understanding of the Ad Dharm case requires a critical look at the evolution of the Indian state, and the manner in which it has dealt with caste and religion. The beginning of the decline of the Ad Dharm movement can perhaps be located in the famous Poona Pact of 1932 between Mahatma Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar and the formation of a Scheduled List in the Government of India Act, 1935. The clubbing of Scheduled Castes with Hindus left no choice for the Ad Dharm Movement in Punjab but to accept the nationalist and official mode of classification. They had to either forego the benefits of ‘reservations’ (positive discrimination to improve the access of disadvantaged groups to political representation, public sector employment, educational opportunities etc) or claim a separate religious identity.<sup>6</sup> Given the socio-economic status of the community at that time, they chose the former and reconciled themselves to a softer approach to the latter. As a senior Dalit activist explained to us:

*Ad Dharm lost its meaning after we got eight seats reserved for us when the elections were first held in the province. Our candidates won seven of the eight seats. Mangoo Ram too was elected to the Assembly during the next election in the year 1945-46.<sup>7</sup>*

Another activist put it even more emphatically

*In 1931 we were recognized as a separate religion by the colonial Census, but by the Act of 1935 we became one of the Scheduled Castes, one among others in the same category. Communal Award<sup>8</sup> had recognized our autonomy, which had to be surrendered by B.R. Ambedkar under the Poona Pact. Under the Poona Pact we were given reservations but only if we accepted to be part of the Hindu religion. ....However, even*

*though we legally became a part of Hinduism, it did not stop discrimination against us. Even now it continues, though it is less pronounced and more subtle.<sup>9</sup>*

Though most of our Dalit respondents remembered the Ad Dharm movement with a sense of pride and some of them felt bad about its decline, we did not observe strong feelings about the movement or resentment among Ad Dharmis at being clubbed with the Hindu religion. Nor could we locate any writings by the movement's erstwhile leaders expressing distress or anger at its decline or attributing it to conspiracies. The Ad Dharm movement and its leaders were perhaps also swayed by the mainstream or dominant politics of the time, i.e. the freedom movement and its hegemonic influence. As one of our respondents, who is currently president of the Ravidas Trust, said to us:

*...at one time the Ad Dharm movement was very popular in Punjab. However, slowly, with growing influence of Congress politics, its leaders started leaving. Master Balwanta Singh was the first to leave Ad Dharm Mandal. He joined the Congress Party. Similarly some other leaders also left the movement to become part of mainstream national politics. Eventually even Mangoo Ram joined the Congress Party. The movement was over.<sup>10</sup>*

Those with more radical views on the Dalit question were swayed by B.R. Ambedkar and joined the Republican Party of India (RPI) and the Scheduled Caste Federation, which he set up. Some eventually turned to Buddhism for spiritual autonomy and religious identity.

Equally important for its decline is perhaps the fact that, although Ad Dharm articulated itself as a religious identity and demanded official recognition as a religious movement, it was essentially a political movement. As a prominent member of the community told us during an interview:

*It had no holy book or scripture of its own, it had no rituals of its own, it had no pilgrimage places, or sacred symbols.... How could it have survived as a religion?<sup>1111</sup> Personal interview in Ballan, Jalandhar in December 2008.*

While the identity of Ad Dharmi simply became a designation of a Hindu caste group for the purpose of official classification, the Chamars of Doaba did not really go back to Hinduism. Instead, they began to develop autonomous religious resources under the identity of 'Ravidasis'.

As mentioned earlier, it was, in fact, during the Ad Dharm movement that the Ravidasi identity had begun to take shape. Leaders of the movement saw a Ravidasi identity as their own resource. In 1971, long after dissolving the Ad Dharm Mandal and being in retirement for many years, Mangoo Ram summed up the achievement of the Ad Dharm Movement in an interview with Mark Juergensmeyer, in which his focus was more on having given the local Dalits a new community and religious identity than their political empowerment:

We helped give them a better life and made them into a *qaum*. We gave them *gurus to believe in* and something to hope for (quoted in Juergensmeyer, 1988, p. 155, emphasis added).

After having changed its name to Ravidas Mandal in 1946, the movement's activists shifted their focus to social and religious matters. They had previously realized that in order to consolidate themselves as a separate *qaum*, they needed a religious system of their own, different from the Hindus and Sikhs. However, in order to develop such a system, they chose a caste-based religious identity based on the figure of Ravidas. Although during its early days, the Ad Dharm movement had aspired to bring all the 'ex-untouchable' communities together into the new faith, their appeal had remained confined mostly to the Chamars of Doaba. After its listing as one of the Scheduled Castes in the Scheduled List, it became obvious and official that Ad Dharmis were a section of the Chamars and Guru Ravidas appeared to the Ad Dharmis to be an obvious choice as a religious symbol for the community: although he had been born in Uttar Pradesh, he belonged to the Chamar caste. The fact that his writings were included in the Sikh holy book, *Adi Granth*, which had been compiled in Punjab and was written in the local language, made Ravidas even more effective and acceptable.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the Ad Dharm movement played a very important role in developing an autonomous political identity and consciousness among the Chamar Dalits of Punjab and its renaming itself as a religious body, Ravidas Mandal, in 1946, was an important turning point in the history of Dalit movements in Punjab. It is important to mention here that the Ravidasi religious identity had already begun to take shape independently of the Ad Dharm movement in the region. In fact, some of the Ravidasi Deras had played an active role in the late 1920s when Mangoo Ram was campaigning for separate religious status for Ad Dharmis and Mangoo Ram often visited them during his campaign.

Interestingly, even when the community reconciled itself to the idea of being clubbed with Hindu Scheduled Castes for the purpose of census enumeration, the identity of being Ad Dharmis continued to be important to them. As many as 14.9 per cent (532,129) of the 7,028,723 members of the Scheduled Castes of Punjab were listed as Ad Dharmis in the 2001 Census, substantially more than those who registered themselves as belonging to the Ad Dharmi *qaum* in 1931. In religious terms, as many as 59.9 per cent of the Punjab Scheduled Caste members enumerated themselves as Sikhs and 39.6 per cent Hindus, while only 0.5 per cent declared their religion as Buddhism.

However, notwithstanding this official classification of all SC people as adherents to the mainstream religions of the region, the everyday religious life of the Punjab Dalits is marked by enormous diversity and plurality. Apart from the popular syncretic religious traditions that have been in existence for a long time, the Dalits of Punjab and elsewhere have also developed an urge for autonomous faith identities, particularly in terms of moving away from Hinduism, because of their view that Hinduism is the source of their humiliating social position in the caste system. This urge became much stronger with the emergence of a nascent educated middle class among them during the later phase of British colonial rule. The Ad Dharm movement of the 1920s (discussed above) was a clear example of this.

### 2.3 Guru Ravidas

Ravidas is believed to have been born into the Chamars (an 'untouchable' caste traditionally identified with leather work) in 1450 A.D. in the north Indian town of Banaras in present day Uttar Pradesh and to have died in 1520 (Omvedt, 2008, p. 7). Like many of his contemporaries, he travelled extensively and had religious dialogues with saint poets in different parts of north India. Over time he acquired the status of a saint. However, his claims to religious authority were frequently challenged by the local Brahmins, who complained to the local rulers about his 'sacrilegious behaviour'. His followers believe that every time the king summoned Ravidas, he managed to convince the political authorities about his genuine 'spiritual powers' through various miraculous acts. He is believed to have also visited Punjab and met with Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith, at least three times. He also gave most of his writings to Guru Nanak, and these eventually became part of the Sikh holy book, the Guru Granth (Jassi, 2001).

Though historians of Indian religions tend to club Ravidas with the Bhakti movement, a pan-Indian devotional cult, his ideas appear to be quite radical. He built his own idea of utopia, a vision of an alternative society, articulated in his hymn *Begumpura*, a city without sorrows, “where there will be no distress, no tax, no restriction from going and coming, no fear”. It is worth presenting the English translation of the poem:

*The regal realm with the sorrowless name:  
they call it Begumpura, a place with no pain,  
No taxes or cares, nor own property there,  
no wrongdoing, worry, terror or torture.  
Oh my brother, I have come to take it as my own,  
my distant home, where everything is right.  
That imperial kingdom is rich and secure,  
where none are third or second- all are one;  
Its food and drink are famous, and those who live there  
dwell in satisfaction and in wealth.  
They do this or that, they walk where they wish,  
they stroll through fabled places unchallenged.  
Oh, says Ravidas, a tanner now set free,  
those who walk beside me are my friends.*

(Hawley and Juergensmeyer, 1988, p. 32)

As is evident from the poem, he is not simply talking about his love for God and his limitless devotion. His utopia is quite ‘this worldly’, aspiring to a life without pain and not emphasizing ‘other worldly’ peace or *moksha*. Equally important is the fact that his message is constructed by his contemporary followers in quite modernist language, in which questions of caste oppression and his fight against the prevailing structures of authority and the Brahmanical moral order are foregrounded. His biographer, Sat Pal Jassi, writes of the social milieu in which he was born:

Since the advent of [the] Vedic Age, [the] caste system and untouchability have been prevalent in India. In [the] passage of time, the socio-religious inhibitions became more strict and cruel. The untouchables were given an ignoble place. They were debarred from acquiring knowledge, [their] own property and worship of God.... These conditions prevailed in India for more than 3000 years (Jassi, 2001, p. 24).

It was in this 'degenerated environment' that Ravidas was born. What did he preach and propagate?

Jassi continues:

He was [a] protagonist of equality, oneness of God, human rights and universal brotherhood....He was a suave socio-religious reformer, a thinker, a theosophist, a humanist, a poet, a traveller, a pacifist and above a towering spiritual figure... He was [a] pioneer of socialistic thought and strengthened noble values (*ibid*, p. 25).

Ravidas's utopia was also significantly different from some of the later writings on 'a desirable India' produced by people like Mahatma Gandhi. As Gail Omvedt rightly comments, Ravidas

....was the first to formulate an Indian version of utopia in his song 'Begumpura'. Begumpura, the 'city without sorrow', is a casteless, classless society; a modern society, one without a mention of temples; an urban society as contrasted with Gandhi's village utopia of *Ram Rajya*.... (Omvedt, 2008, p. 7).

Though born into a Dalit family, Ravidas became part of the larger movement of protest against Brahmanical control over social and religious life and was accepted as a leader across the entire region. His identification with Guru Nanak, who was from an upper caste, clearly demonstrates this: as mentioned above, Guru Nanak added forty of Ravidas' hymns and one couplet into his collection of important writings of the times, which were eventually compiled into the *Adi Granth* by the fifth Sikh Guru.

It is perhaps this connection with Guru Nanak and Sikhism that explains why the major centres of Ravidas emerged in Punjab and not Uttar Pradesh, where Ravidas was born. It was the inclusion of his writings in the *Guru Granth* that, in a sense, kept Ravidas alive, albeit among the people of Punjab. Though a separate Sikh movement evolved quite early on, the Sikh gurus and the *Guru Granth* have also been revered by those who do not necessarily identify themselves as Sikhs (see Oberoi, 1994).

However, unlike the Sikh movement, Ravidas did not attract a significant community of followers and did not appoint a successor. Thus, even though he had developed a critique of the Brahmanical social order, in the absence of a community of followers he could not develop any kind of political ambitions. It was only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that a community of Ravidasis began to emerge, initially in Punjab and later in other parts of north India. It was only with the loosening of the caste hierarchy and village social

structures that an 'untouchable' caste could begin to constitute itself as a separate religious community. As discussed above, the Chamars of Doaba were among the first in north India to organize themselves under the name of the Ad Dharm movement and to rediscover Ravidas.

## 2.4 The Ravidasis today

Though the message of Ravidas was integrated into the Sikh holy book and routinely read and sung in Sikh *gurudwaras* as part of the *gurbani* (religious singing), it was only in the early years of the twentieth century that separate Ravidasi Deras began to emerge in Punjab. The reason can perhaps be found in the growing prosperity of Chamars in the region after the British set up a cantonment in Jalandhar. Reform movements among the major religious communities (Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs) would also have played a role in opening up opportunities for them to obtain secular education.

Perhaps the most important of the Guru Ravidas Deras in Punjab today is the Dera located in the village of Ballan, around ten kilometres from the town of Jalandhar and known locally as Dera Sachkhand Ballan. Though the Dera was set up by Sant Pipal Dass some time during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>13</sup> it is identified more with his son, Sant Sarwan Dass. In fact, among its followers, it is also known as Dera Sant Sarwan Dass, as per the popular myth narrated to us by various respondents during the fieldwork, which we also found in published leaflets. The history of the Dera goes like this:

Sant Sarwan Dass was born in a village called Gill Patti in Bhatinda district of Punjab. He lost his mother when he was five years old. To help his son overcome the loss, his father, Pipal Dass, decided to travel with him. After visiting a few places, they came to village Ballan. The elder brother of Sarwan Das had earlier lived in the same village. On the outskirts of the village Ballan, they found a Pipal tree that was completely dry and dead. However, when Pipal Dass watered the tree, life returned to it and its leaves turned green. This, for him, was an indication of the place being spiritually blessed. The tree also made the child Sarwan Das happy. The father and son decided to build a hut close to the tree and began to live there.

After the death of his father in 1928, Sant Sarwan Dass expanded his activities. He opened a school and started teaching Gurumukhi and the message of Guru Granth to young children. He also persuaded his followers to send their children to the school. 'Parents who do not educate their children are their enemies,' he used to tell his followers.

Impressed with the work that Sant Sarwan Dass was doing in the village, a local landlord gave him one *kanal* of land (about one-fifth of an acre) close to the hut, where the Dera building was eventually constructed. Sarwan Dass remained head of the Dera from October 11, 1928 until he died in June 1972. He was succeeded by Sant Hari Dass and Sant Garib Dass. The Dera is currently headed by Sant Niranjana Dass.

### **2.4.1 Ravidasi as a religious identity**

As mentioned above, the Ad Dharm movement rapidly declined after the signing of the Poona Pact. Over the years, it virtually acquired the status of a caste identity. During the post-independence period, Ad Dharmis were listed as a Hindu Scheduled Caste in the Scheduled List for Punjab. However, their attitude towards Hinduism has always been ambivalent. Given their status as 'untouchables' within classical Hinduism, they were never comfortable with their Hindu identity. On the other hand, they did not want give up the possible benefits of being a Scheduled Caste in the new state system. Indeed, public sector employment has been an extremely effective source of upward mobility for individual Dalits.

Sikhism has been an attractive alternative for the Dalits of Punjab. A good number of them in fact joined the faith and identify themselves as Sikhs. However, the continued presence of caste differences within Sikhism and the dominance of certain caste groups in Sikh religious affairs gives Dalits the impression that they continue to be treated as less than equals (see Jodhka, 2002).

The alternative is autonomy. Ravidasi identity and the Deras run by the gurus and babas of their own caste offer them such an identity. The most important of these is the Dera Ballan.

### **2.4.2 The Dera and the disciples**

What makes the Dera Ballan popular with ordinary Ravidasis? Why are they so committed to the Dera? What is the reason for such close identification with their Gurus? Do they visit the Dera purely as part of their spiritual quest or do they also have more worldly motives? Apart from interviewing important functionaries of the Dera, we also spoke to 21 'lay disciples' to find answers to these questions.

Though its primary identity is religious, the Dera at Ballan appears to be playing an active role in consolidating the caste community. A recent survey showed that those who visited the Dera were all from the Chamars/Ad Dharmi caste (Simon, 2008). The Dera gives them a sense of identity and its opulence and grandeur makes them feel proud. They regard it as a symbol of prosperity and dignity. Even when they themselves are not rich, the Dera perhaps helps them to forget their poverty and marginality (ibid).

Our interviews with the disciples seemed to confirm this. Dalit empowerment, autonomy and development were some of the common points they underlined. While these ideals appeared to be purely secular, for the Ravidasi Dalits they were a part and parcel of the religious movement. Shankar (a pseudonym), for example, viewed the Dera and the growing influence of Ravidas's teachings as symbolizing the autonomy and empowerment of Punjabi Dalits. He put it quite sharply:

*I am a Chamar by caste. Earlier we were treated as untouchables. Things have changed. Earlier we were not even allowed to worship God. Guru Ravidas's message was that even Chamars have the right to worship God.... Guru Ravidas's worshippers can be from any community. I am from the Ravidasi community. I do not believe in caste. .... Earlier we used to worship Guru Ravidas in a hidden way. But now we do it in a respectable way.<sup>14</sup>*

The fact that the Dera has not only confined its activities to religion but has also started its own schools and hospitals as charitable institutions was seen as evidence of Brahmanism being challenged by the Ravidasi movement. As Shankar put it:

*Schools and hospitals are being opened by the Dera. I think that it has posed a serious challenge to Brahmanism. They (the upper castes) had barred us from getting educated, and today we have reached a stage where we can teach and provide education to our community.<sup>15</sup>*

Another respondent, Raju (a pseudonym), was even more articulate on the point of caste discrimination and the role the Dera has played in Dalit empowerment, giving them a sense of dignity and autonomy:

*We need the Dera to make people aware about Guru Ravidas. When we go to other Mandirs and Gurudwaras, there is psychological discrimination, if not physical. But here, because it is our community that manages everything, there is no discrimination at all. In fact, we feel a sense of pride that we are in our place of worship. We would not have*

*needed a separate Mandir or Gurudwara had there been no discrimination. But Hindu society is divided on caste lines. Guru Ravidas fought against it and for our dignity. So we worship Guru Ravidas.*<sup>16</sup>

Interestingly, respondents claimed that not only the Hindu temples prohibited Dalits from entering, but even other Deras in Punjab. One respondent pointed to the fact that:

*Earlier there was discrimination. That is why our people have opened our own Deras. We do not discriminate. We respect all religions and communities. The other Deras do not respect us. It is only in our own Dera that we feel welcomed. Dera Beas, for example, is the biggest Dera in Punjab, but they do not respect Dalits.*<sup>17</sup>

It is not only the Hindu society that treats Dalits badly, even the Jat Sikhs in rural areas are reported to discriminate against them and their religion. “Even when we keep Guru Granth in our temples in the villages, no Jat will ever enter our temples”, reported another respondent in Ballan. Underlining the need for a separate autonomous religion for Dalits, he argued that the Ballan Dera was doing precisely that:

*Every religion needs a Guru. The Dera has given our community a Guru. The Dera never gets involved with politics. However, when we need to fight for our rights, it unites the community. Our Gurus have worked hard to keep the community united. They have stopped members of our community from going to other Deras. They have opened schools and hospitals.*<sup>18</sup>

References to caste and discrimination and the need for an autonomous religious system for the Dalit community were common in many other interviews. Equally common were references to the emphasis that the Ravidasi Gurus have given to education. Not only did the disciples point to the schools opened by the Dera, but many of them also invoked their personal example of having been able to study only because they were able to get financial help from the Dera Gurus or because of their persistence and motivation.

Though Dera Ballan is a religious centre with a focus on preaching universalistic values and spirituality, it actively identifies itself with local Dalit issues and Dalit politics. Not only do its leaders and disciples foreground Ravidas’s message of building a casteless society, they have also been actively identified with Dalit activism. Sant Sarwan Dass kept in active touch with Mangoo Ram during the Ad

Dharm movement and Mangoo Ram visited the Dera to communicate his message to the Dalit masses of the region. During one of his visits to Delhi, he also met B.R. Ambedkar, who was reported as having shown “great respect to Sant Sarwan Dass Ji”. In one his letters to Ambedkar, Sant Sarwan Dass described him as “a great son of the community”.<sup>19</sup>

In the emerging national context, Dalit political leaders had begun to connect up with each other across regions. This wider ambition was not confined to Dalit political activists, but could be also seen in the efforts of religious gurus like Sant Sarwan Dass. The message of Ravidas had until then reached Punjabi Dalits primarily through the Sikh holy scripture, the Guru Granth. However, the religious institutions of Sikhism were mostly controlled by the ‘upper castes’.<sup>20</sup> The continued presence of caste differences and hierarchy in the region made Sant Sarwan Dass look for internal resources, within the caste community, for further expansion of the Dera activities. Ravidas was the obvious symbol for Chamar Dalits attempting to build an autonomous community of believers. Over the years they have also tried to distinguish themselves from the Sikhs. They, for example, have replaced the Sikh *Ek Aunkar* (first word of the Guru Granth, meaning God is one, with their own term for God: *Har*, a Punjabi word. Though the format of the prayer is similar to that recited in Sikh gurudwaras, Ravidasis have introduced subtle differences. Most recently, after the murder of a Ravidasi Guru in Vienna (Austria), probably by fundamentalist Sikhs (see Jodhka, 2009), many of the Ravidasi Deras have removed the Guru Granth, worshipping only pictures of Guru Ravidas and singing only the poetry (*bani*) of Guru Ravidas. The writings of Ravidas have also been compiled into separate books.

Dera Ballan has continued to be an important centre of Dalit political activity in Punjab. Leaders, writers and intellectuals of the community often meet at the Dera and discuss emerging political and cultural challenges facing the community of Ravidasis. Kanshi Ram, for example, another Punjabi leader of the Dalits of north India, who was born into a Ravidasi family, was a frequent visitor to the Dera, not only to pay his respects to the Dera chief, but also to discuss strategies for making Dalit politics more effective with other leaders of the community.

## 2.5 The diaspora effect

A second phase in the history of the Ravidas movement in Punjab began during the 1990s, with intensified globalization. Along with other Punjabis, a large number of Chamars from the Doaba region had migrated to countries in the Western hemisphere during the 1950s and 1960s. Though no exact figures are available, quoting the Indian consular office, Juergensmeyer claims that in the United Kingdom the “percentage of Scheduled Castes within the total Punjabi community was as high as 10 percent. The rest were largely Jat Sikhs” (Juergensmeyer, 1988, p. 246).<sup>21</sup>

In a diasporic context, with no systemic justification for a caste ideology, the Punjabi Dalits did not expect to be reminded of their ‘low’ status in the caste hierarchy. While they did not have problems in their work places or in the urban public sphere in the UK, in practice they often experienced caste prejudice when they tried to be part of the local Punjabi diaspora community. Juergensmeyer sums this up quite well in the following words:

The Chamars, who came to Britain expecting to find life different, take offence at the upper caste Sikhs’ attitude towards them. They earn as much as the Jat Sikhs, sometimes more, and occasionally find themselves placed by the British in command over them – a Chamar foreman superintending a Jat Sikh work crew – much to the displeasure of the latter...The Scheduled Castes can afford to act more bravely in Britain since they have now entered a new context for competing with the Jat Sikhs. In the Punjab the cards were stacked against them, but in Britain they have a fresh start, and the ideology of Ad Dharm has prepared them to take advantage of it (Juergensmeyer, 1988, pp. 247-8).

Migrant Dalits felt a caste bias against them in the gurdwaras, which were mostly controlled by the Jats and other upper caste Sikhs. However, given their numbers and local economic position, Dalits did not find it difficult to claim equal status and dignity. They began to set up autonomous associations in the name of Guru Ravidas: the first two were established in Britain, in the towns of Birmingham and Wolverhampton, in 1956 (*ibid*, p. 248). While during the first 20 to 25 years after settling, Dalits built their own community organizations and separate gurdwaras wherever they could, over the years they also began to seek to influence their homeland. During the early 1990s, the growing availability of new communication channels, such as the internet and satellite television, made it easier for them to renew active relationships with the Punjab and the Ravidasi community at home.

By the early 1990s, diaspora Dalits had also experienced considerable economic mobility, which made it easier for them to travel home, and they began to do so more frequently. When they returned to the Punjab, they also brought funds for the religious Deras and this new money and diasporic energy played a very important role in the further growth of the Ravidasi movement. This was summed up well by a Dalit businessman, who has been involved in mobilizing the Ravidasi *sants* into a pan-Indian association:

*It is the brethren from the West who first understood the value of our Deras and the need to strengthen them. They gave huge donations when they came to pay a visit. The number of visitors from abroad and the frequency of their visits also increased during the 1990s. They invited the local Sants to their countries. All this gave a boost to the Ravidasi movement.<sup>22</sup>*

The value of going beyond their immediate sphere of influence to mobilize the global community has also motivated the current Ravidasi Gurus and leaders of Deras to regularly travel abroad to the countries of Europe and North America where Punjabi Ravidasis are settled. Apart from collecting money for their activities in India, these visits also connect members of the Ravidasi diaspora with the Punjab and give them a sense of being a community different from the Sikhs.

Over the last fifteen years or so, the Dera at Ballan has expanded significantly. A new building was inaugurated in the year 2007, in which nearly twenty thousand people can be accommodated to listen to the teachings of Guru Ravidas. It has a *langar* hall where two thousand people can eat together. Among other things, this hall has the technology for live telecasting and recording. In collaboration with the Jalandhar channel of Doordarshan (a television channel run by the Government of India), the Dera telecasts a programme called *Amrit Bani* every Friday and Saturday morning.

In addition to the expansion of Dera Ballan, over the years, Deras, gurudwaras and temples in the name of Guru Ravidas have flourished in Punjab, particularly in the Doaba region where Ad Dharmis and Chamars have been numerically predominant among the Dalits. We were told that there are some six or seven major Sants who can be considered as leaders of the community and more than 250 Deras/gurudwaras in the name of Guru Ravidas in the State of Punjab. Although all are patronized exclusively by local Chamars and Ad Dharmis, some have become quite affluent and influential.

## 2.6 Beyond Punjab: the Ravidas Jayanti celebration at Banaras

Apart from its presence in countries of the Western hemisphere among migrant Punjabi Ravidasis, religious leaders from Punjab have also tried to go out to other parts of India in order to build a national community of Ravidasi Dalits. This process began fairly early, in a search for the roots of their religious ideas, but took off only during the 1990s, when the community acquired a new sense of confidence as a result of the growing power of Dalit politics at the national level and a stronger sense of community with the intensification of diasporic connections. These processes in turn helped to reinforce community identity and self-confidence in the Punjab.

As mentioned above, notwithstanding the influence of Sikhism and the reverence shown for the Guru Granth, there has been a strong urge among Punjabi Ravidasis to connect with the larger caste community, the Chamars, who live in different States of India and abroad. The initial impulse for this search for distinctive roots was to give them a sense of autonomy and a separate identity. In addition to a natural urge for expansion, the search for autonomy also arose from a desire to move away from Sikhism. While Ravidasi leaders acknowledge the contribution of the Sikh Gurus in making the teachings of Ravidas available to the world, by including his writings in the Guru Granth, they also feel uneasy about the subaltern status that the contemporary Sikh community tends to bestow on their Guru. The Ravidasis would like to see their Guru being treated equally with the Sikh Gurus, but mainstream Sikhism tends to make a distinction between Gurus and Bhagats. The status of Guru is reserved for the ten Sikh Gurus, whereas Ravidas, along with other non-Sikh Gurus whose writings are included in the Guru Granth, is treated as a Bhagat and his writings as *Bhagat Bani* (for example, see Singh, 2003). One of the responses to the perceived second class status accorded to Ravidas was to establish a temple in his name.

Having established a separate religious centre in Punjab, Sant Sarwan Dass (the head of Dera Ballan) decided to travel to Banaras in 1950, hoping to visit the shrine at the birthplace of his Guru, Guru Ravidas. However, to his surprise and disappointment he could not find a shrine or place in Ravidas's name. He therefore took it upon himself to build a temple in the name of Ravidas. With the help of his followers at Dera Ballan, he purchased a piece of land on the outskirts of Banaras where, on the 16<sup>th</sup> of June 1965, he laid the foundation stone of the Ravidas temple. The first phase of construction of this temple was completed in the year 1972.

*Though the leaders were excited about building the Ravidas temple in Banaras, the disciples, who were mostly from Punjab, were apprehensive. How were they going to visit Banaras? "When the subject came up for discussion with the Sant Sarwan Das Ji, he said, 'we will hire a special train which will go all the way from Jalandhar to Banaras once every year, at the time of the birth anniversary of Ravidas. This train will be called Begampura Express'."*<sup>23</sup>

Thus the leaders of Dera Ballan not only control the temple at Banaras and have been working on its expansion, but also mobilize members of the community from Punjab and other parts of India to visit Banaras, at least once annually, at the time of the Ravidasi Jayanti (Ravidasi's birthday) in February. As indicated above, they hire a special train from Jalandhar, the Beghumpura Express, which takes followers to Banaras (see Box 1). This has also become an occasion for Chamars and Ad Dharmis from different parts of the country and the world to come together at the birthplace of Ravidas. For instance, in 2008 followers of Guru Ravidas in Europe installed a golden palanquin at the Banaras Mandir, now also known as the Janam Sthan Mandir of Guru Ravidas. The Dera Ballan leaders have also been successful in bringing Dalit political leaders to Banaras on special occasions. Notably, on 16<sup>th</sup> July, 1998, when diasporic Ravidasis sponsored the construction of a monumental gate at the entrance of the temple, the then President of India, Dr. K. R. Narayanan, a Dalit himself, was invited to inaugurate it and the Punjabi Dalit leader Kanshi Ram personally coordinated the function.

A trust named The Sri Guru Ravidas Janam Sthan Public Charitable Trust manages the temple at Banaras and several other Guru Ravidas temples that have been established in different parts of India, including the Guru Ravidas Mandir at Sirsagarh in Haryana, the Guru Ravidas Mandir at Pune in Maharashtra and the Guru Ravidas Mandir at Hadiabad at Phagwara in Punjab. Thus, the Dera Ballan leaders have enabled the construction of further temples in the name of Ravidas and to network with other Ravidasi groups, using religion as a symbolic source of unity. In addition, there are a large number of 'parallel' gurus with their own deras, who all work in the name of Ravidas. These deras have formed an association of their own, called the Sri Guru Ravidas Sadhu Sampradai Society, with the intention of mobilizing all the Chamars of India. Thus it has been possible for the Ravidasis to project themselves as part of a politically mobilized community, underlining the way in which the rise of Dalit politics in the Punjab has further encouraged the growth of the Ravidasi movement.

## Box 1: The Beghumpura Express and the Ravidas Jayanti celebration at Banaras

The birthday celebration of Sri Guru Ravidas is the most important event celebrated by the Ravidasi community in Punjab. However, it is celebrated in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, the birth place of Guru Ravidas, rather than in the Punjab. The Dera Sachkhand Ballan constructed the Sri Guru Ravidas Janam Sthan Mandir at Seer Goverdhanpur, Varanasi (U.P.) and named this place Beghumpura. It has become a pilgrimage site for followers of Guru Ravidas from all over the world.

Sant Sarwan Dass undertook the task of honouring the memory of Sri Guru Ravidas by constructing a memorial in his name. In 1950, when he visited Banaras but did not find a place of worship for Ravidas, he asked his disciple in Ballan, Sant Garib Dass, to start working on the construction of a mandir at the birthplace of Guru Ravidas. On June 16<sup>th</sup> 1965 the foundation stone of the temple was laid and it was completed in 1972. A few years later a statue of Guru Ravidas was installed in the mandir.

In order to manage the affairs of the mandir, a trust with the name of Sri Guru Ravidass Janam Sthan Public Charitable Trust (SGRJSPT) was constituted, with its head office at Dera Sachkhand Ballan and a branch office at the site of the mandir. However, it was not until the 1990s that the community gained visibility, following a visit in 1990 by some followers of Guru Ravidas from the UK, who came to India in order to visit Sri Guru Ravidas mandir and to pay tribute to Sant Sarwan Dass. This started a new era for Ravidasis in India and beyond. The trust undertook additional construction work at the mandir, ending with the installation of a golden *kalash* (pot) on the top of the mandir by Kanshi Ram, a popular Dalit leader and the founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party. A year later, the Sant Sarwan Dass Trust, UK, decided to build a monumental gate to the memory of Guru Ravidas, which was inaugurated in 1998 by the then President of India, Dr. K R Narayanan, himself a Dalit. The trust has also built a large langar hall, for serving free food to visitors to the mandir, as well as a four-storey building with eleven rooms on each floor for the accommodation of visitors. SGRJSPT also manages other mandirs devoted to Guru Ravidass, for example at Sirsagarh, Haryana, and Phagwara, Punjab.

Also in 1990, the SGRJSPT decided to run a special train from Jalandhar to Varanasi (Banaras) on the occasion of Sri Guru Ravidas's birthday in the month of February every year, the 'Beghumpura Express'. Since then, this train goes to Varanasi every year, and pilgrims from all the States of India gather on the occasion of Guru Ravidas Jayanti. People from Maharashtra, where the Dera Ballan has built a Guru Ravidas Mandir (Pune), hire special bogies to make the pilgrimage every year. The train has 22 compartments, which are initially booked by the trust for five days (February 6-10<sup>th</sup> at a cost of 35-40 lakh rupees). The trust then sells tickets to followers. Though the SGRJSPT manages the train, enthusiastic followers share responsibility.

Followers in Boota Mandi, Jalandhar, provide food and water on the train; from Jalandhar, it stops at Ludhiana and Ambala, where followers provide refreshments for all the passengers; and then once the train reaches Delhi, it is received by Guru Ravidass Sabha, in R. K. Puram, Delhi.

The mandir in Banaras has become the biggest religious centre for the followers of Guru Ravidas, and it attracts devotees throughout the year. The Trust has received donations from both foreign countries and within India. In 2008, followers in Europe (excluding the UK) donated a golden palanquin. Following its growing popularity, in 2008 the UP government decided to establish a special *ghat* (bathing place) in the name of Guru Ravidas on the banks of the river Ganga and renamed the bridge over the river near the mandir the Sri Guru Ravidas Setu.

## 2.7 Mobilizing religion for community and development

As is evident from the above discussion, apart from providing religious symbols for the local community, some of the deras have also been actively involved with development work. They have opened schools and hospitals in the Punjab region, which provide quality education and health services. A senior functionary of one dera saw a direct link between their religious work and development of the community:

*A large majority in our community is still illiterate. They are yet to understand the language of development. The social development of the community that you see today is mostly a result of the religious movement. People easily get mobilized in the name of religion. Religions appeal to everyone, poor and rich. It is only in the name of religion that they are willing to donate. You ask them to donate for social work in a secular language, you will get nothing. The Dera plays a very critical role in the development of people here. It has the capacity to unite people on any issue. It has become a common place where people can come and discuss their grief, pain and happiness. It has given the Dalit community of Punjab an identity in India and abroad. Now people all over the world know who Ravidasis are and who Guru Ravidas was.<sup>24</sup>*

The point about the importance of religion in mobilizing money was also underlined by the Principal of one of the schools being run by Ravidasis (see Box 2). As he said:

*It is only the deras and Gurus who can get money for running a school or a hospital. If some lay person from the community was to open a school, no one will give any donations. This is because people feel that he is doing it for profit. But, when Baba ji starts a project, people know that it is not for business. Baba ji does not work with a profit motive.<sup>25</sup>*

Some of the schools run by the Dera are doing very well (see Box 2). Although these schools are not exclusivist and are open to all, the Dalit community uses them much more than others. As a senior Dalit activist told us in Phagwara:

*Though in principle these institutions are open to all, not everyone likes to come to our schools because of their identification with Dalits. Given that the government-run schools where most of our children go to study do not teach anything [about the movement], the schools run by Dera are very useful. They provide quality education and the teachers there are sympathetic to our children. The poorer kids are also not charged any fee and are given scholarships and other incentives to study. Even if you do not agree with the Sants on their ideology, you cannot ignore their contribution to the community.<sup>26</sup>*

Apart from supporting several schools, the Dera Ballan has also opened hospitals, some with high-end specialties (see Boxes 3 and 4). The majority of users of both types of facility are Ravidasis, and they depend on additional funds received from devotees. Though the managers of the institutions claim that they have never been thought of as income generating sources, they accept that they are not complete charities. The aim of meeting recurrent expenditure from fees, they claim, is to improve the quality of the services, so that although donations have to be used to supplement earned income, most donations can be used to improve the facilities and expand the services provided, as well as to increase the quality of service delivery.

## Box 2: The Sant Sarwan Dass Model School

An important institution created by Dera Sackhand Ballan is the Sant Sarwan Dass Model School at Hadiabad near Phagwara, which was established in 2004. During his lifetime, Sant Sarwan Dass used to teach children in the Dera and was critical of parents who did not educate their children. However, with his death this system of informal education ended.

However, in 2001, a devotee in a *sangat* (meeting) addressed Sant Niranjan Dass, the then *gaddi-nashin*: “*Maharaj ji, you have taken us to Kashi [Banaras], Haridwar, you have given us the facility of medical treatment, you are looking after all our needs, but Maharaj ji, education is becoming costlier day by day, please pay attention to that also.*” To this end, a gentleman named Seth Brij Lal expressed his desire to donate land for constructing a school.

The school was built within three years and opened in 2004. It soon became affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and today is considered to be as good as, if not better than, many others in the region. It has 36 classrooms, around 800 students and 53 staff

members, including 34 teachers, as well as a large assembly hall, a children's exhibition hall, a good library and a large playground. Initially the school was established up to 7<sup>th</sup> standard but in 2007 it created its first batch of Class X, with a 100 per cent success for 20 students in the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) annual examination.

The Principal of the school informed us that since 2004, the annual operational expenditure has doubled. While it started with 350-400 students, at a cost of 30-40 lakhs per year, it now has 800 students, the majority from the Ravidasi community, at a cost of 60-70 lakhs a year. According to an estimate provided by the management, it has spent approximately three crores on buildings and other infrastructural developments. Since the majority of the students belong to the poorest sections of society, the fees have been kept low. In addition, those parents whose annual income is less than 60 thousand rupees can take advantage of a 40 per cent concession on fees. More than 70 per cent of the students hold such scholarships. Running an annual deficit of nearly 25 per cent, the school is maintained by regular donations received from devotees.

The school is managed by the management board of the Sri Guru Ravidas Janam Sthan Mandir Trust (which is itself headed by the Dera Sachkhand Ballan *gaddi-nashin* (religious head), Sant Niranjn Dass). There is also a local school management team headed by Sant Ramanand, another Sant of Dera Sachkhand Ballan. Although the school does not directly provide any kind of religious education, the morning prayer is selected from the poems of Sri Guru Ravidas.

### Box 3: The Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital

The Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital was established in 1984 at Adda Kathar, near Jalandhar. The foundation stone of the hospital was laid on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1982 by the then *gaddi-nashin*, Swami Garib Dass. The land for this hospital was donated by Seth Beli Ram and Seth Raj Mal, followers of Sant Sarwan Dass ji. Initially, a small rural dispensary with three rooms, soon demand increased and three in-patient wards with eight beds were constructed. However, as demand increased further, this was insufficient and Swami Garib Dass established a trust in the name of Sant Sarwan Dass (the Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital Trust) and raised funds for a hospital. Visits to England and the US proved very helpful, as followers of the Dera readily gave donations to the *sant*. On his return, the hospital was able to open X-ray facilities (following the donation of an X-ray machine by a follower in the US) and a laboratory, and the number of beds was increased. The task of performing surgery could only start when, in February 1992, they built a well-equipped operating theatre and emergency rooms. To pay obeisance to Sant Sarwan Dass, a small temple was built in the hospital compound.

While the hospital initially started as a small dispensary, it has now established other specialisms, such as dental, orthopaedic, ophthalmic, gynaecological and paediatric departments, alongside emergency ward and intensive care facilities. It now has three operating theatres and 150 beds. From one doctor initially, the hospital now has over a dozen medical staff and is well-known for its competent surgeons and surgical facilities. Residential doctors and other staff members are provided with living quarters and there is a hostel for outstation nurses working in the hospital. In 2008 the total number of employees was above one hundred.

The management of the hospital is under the Hospital Trust, which is headed by the *gaddi-nashin* of the Dera Sachkhand Ballan. One of the prime objectives of the Trust is to provide medical facilities to patients who cannot afford expensive treatment, with the cost of such treatment met by the Dera Sachkhand Ballan.

The hospital currently comprises three large blocks and recently work began on a new outpatient department block, with an estimated expenditure of around 2 crore rupees. Capital expenditure (i.e. expanding hospital buildings, buying equipment etc.) is all met from donations. The recurrent expenditure (i.e. salaries, management costs) is currently around 1.5 crores. While attempts have been made to recover these costs through charging patients for out-patient treatment, laboratory tests, use of beds etc., the hospital is running a deficit of 25 per cent every year, which has to be met from donations.

The administration of the hospital is run on a fully computerized system, with the result that, according to the management, there have been no administrative or financial crises. All the accounts of the hospital are computerized and in order to maintain transparency with respect to donated external funds, the Hospital Trust holds an FCRA (Foreign Contributions (Regulation) Act) account in a nationalized bank and maintains different accounts for donations.

Even though the hospital has acquired a good reputation, those who visit it for treatment are largely members of the Ravidasi or other Dalit communities. Only poor members of upper castes visit the hospital, presumably because it belongs to the Ravidasi community.

### Box 4: The Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Eye Hospital

In 2007, Dera Ballan dedicated an eye hospital to the community in Ballan village. The credit for founding this hospital, as told by followers and the management of the Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital Trust, goes to Sarwan Dass Bangar, a disciple of Sant Sarwan Dass, who in the mid-1970s emigrated to England with the help of Sarwan Dass. After a few years he re-visited Ballan and since then an eye camp has been held each year during his visit. However, since 2003-4, the government of Punjab has restricted such open medical camps and Sarwan Dass Bangar has been compelled to discontinue such activities. However, his devotion to this social cause was so deep-rooted that he is reported to have donated more than one crore rupees to Dera Ballan to build an eye hospital in the village. This hospital is equipped for diagnostics as well as surgery, and has instruments such as a YAG laser and photo emulsification machine. Several eye operations have been performed since 2007.

## 2.8 Concluding comments

Writing on the Punjabi Dalits nearly four decades ago, Mark Juergensmeyer characterized their social and economic position by using the phrase 'cultures of deprivation'. Though he did not see similarities between the situation of Punjabi Dalits and the slum-dwelling Mexican poor, the invocation of Oscar Lewis's work on the *Culture of Poverty* (Lewis, 1959) seems quite obvious. Unlike the situation of the poor in the Mexican slum, however, the Dalits were not simply poor: their poverty was often reinforced by institutionalized prejudice, the caste system, and the symbolic order of Hinduism. It is this peculiar reality that makes it crucial for the Dalits to pursue not simply a path out of economic poverty but also a struggle for cultural autonomy and a search for a symbolic system that gives them a sense of self-esteem and dignity.

As discussed above, a section of the Dalits in the Doaba region of Punjab began to experience social and economic mobility during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when a new 'secular economy' was created by British rule. However, given the nature of their deprivation, the economically mobile Dalits soon realized the need for cultural resources that would also give them dignity. Given the religious nature of the ideological power of caste, they could imagine alternatives only in religious modes. The Ad Dharm movement was the outcome of this first generation of economically and socially mobile Dalits of Punjab.

Though its main demand during the early phase was for the recognition and enumeration of Ad Dharm as a separate religion, it was not really a religious movement. As we were told by a senior Dalit activist in Jalandhar, *“they had no sacred scripture of their own, they had no sacred symbols of their own, they had no sacred places of pilgrimage, how could have they sustained Ad Dharm as a separate religion?”*<sup>27</sup> This was indeed the case. When it came to actually working out a religious system, the Ad Dharmis of Doaba inevitably went back to their caste identity or the available religious resources. The most attractive and easily available resources were the teachings of Ravidas and the Sikh holy book, the Guru Granth. They even took to Sikh rituals and ceremonies. Assertion of autonomy through adoption of the Sikh religious text was also easier because by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Sikhism had become hegemonic in the Punjab region.

However, the continued experience of caste in Punjabi culture and in the agrarian districts of rural Punjab reinforced their desire for a separate identity, the kind of identity that Ad Dharm had promised them. Though it did not last for long, the Ad Dharm movement was successful in instilling a sense of autonomy and community among the Chamar Dalits of Doaba. Urbanization, migration and the impact of the Green Revolution during the post-independence period reinforced this process. The new capitalist agriculture nearly destroyed the old structures of dependency and patronage. Not only did Dalits start dissociating themselves from their traditional caste occupations, they were also able to distance themselves from the local agrarian economy. Even when they continued to live in villages, they acquired a sense of autonomy from the so-called village communities. Although in the absence of radical land reforms, they did not feel economically empowered as agriculturalists, they were able to create new routes to escape traditional local power structures. Their newly acquired political agency and the emergence of a Dalit political and economic elite helped them to further consolidate their identity. Leadership has mostly been provided by mobile Dalits, those who were the first to escape the traditional caste hierarchy into urban occupations, namely successful businessmen and professionals.

Their quest for a separate religious identity began to be articulated through the Ravidasi Deras and their religious heads, who all came from within the caste community. Identification with Ravidasi Deras and the building of separate Ravidasi Gurudwaras in almost every village in Doaba acquired the shape of a social movement. Migration to urban centres in India and abroad and growing prosperity among a

section of Ravidasis provided resources to sustain this movement. Over the years Ravidasis have emerged as a strong religious community. Though its centre continues to be in the Doaba region of Punjab, its spread is much wider, to other parts of Punjab, neighboring Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and even far off Maharashtra. The community is reinforced by the increasingly active involvement of Ravidasi diaspora. This newly acquired strength was quite visible when two of its religious leaders were attacked during a visit to Vienna in May 2009, apparently by radical Sikhs. At that time, the Ravidasis of Punjab were able to virtually paralyze the entire state of Punjab for nearly three days, when they came out to express their anger against the attack, in which one of their senior leaders had died.

This incident also demonstrated the growing political weight of the community: among those who attended the cremation of the deceased religious leader at Dera Ballan in Jalandhar were the Chief Ministers of Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, two cabinet ministers from the Government of India and several other senior leaders from different political parties.

This transformation of an ex-untouchable caste into a strong religious community clearly has social and developmental effects for members of the community and Punjabi society at large. As we have shown above, based on interviews with a cross-section of respondents, one of the most frequently referred to contributions of the Dera for its followers was the motivation it has provided for education and the sense of dignity it has given to the community of ex-untouchable Chamars. The religious idiom thus seems to be playing a very important role in the “horizontal consolidation” of the Chamars, to use M.N. Srinivas’s term (Srinivas, 1962). In a democratic polity like that of India, where religious and caste communities have become important actors in electoral politics, a marginalized group of Dalits only stands to gain through such a process. While on the one hand their consolidation into a strong community enables them open their own institutions for a better human life (schools and hospitals), on the other such a process of mobilization strengthens their bargaining capacity vis-à-vis the state and other sections of civil society.

### 3 “Don’t call us Dalits, we are Buddhists”: caste and religious mobilizations in Maharashtra

The large-scale conversion to Buddhism of members of a specific ex-untouchable community in Maharashtra, the Mahars, is introduced below, followed by a more detailed examination of the history of this group, especially the opportunities opened up to them during the colonial era. In Section 3.3, the emergence of B.R. Ambedkar as their key leader in the 1950s, and his vision, strategy and tactics are analysed. The ways in which the neo-Buddhist movement he founded has been consolidated since his death, through both consolidating a distinctive neo-Buddhist religious identity and establishing facilities and programmes designed to improve access to social services, education and employment opportunities, are described in Section 3.4.

#### 3.1 Introduction

The political sociology of contemporary Maharashtra has been quite different from that of Punjab. Unlike the peripheral status of Punjab, Maharashtra has always been in the mainstream of the national political system. It is also much bigger than Punjab in size and population: it is the third largest state in India and its total population is second only to that of Uttar Pradesh. As per the 2001 census, Maharashtra had a population of 96.7 million. With cities like Mumbai, Pune and Nagpur, Maharashtra is amongst the most urbanized regions of India, with 42.4 per cent of its population living in urban centres in 2001 compared to the national average of around 27 per cent, although in this respect it is more similar to Punjab, with 34 per cent of its population living in urban areas.

Socially and culturally, Maharashtra can also be described as one of the mainstream states of India. Its religious demography closely resembles the national demography, unlike Punjab. An overwhelming majority of Maharashtrians are Hindu (80.2 per cent), with Muslims (10.6 per cent) and Buddhists (6 per cent) as prominent minority populations. Christians too have a presence in the state, being around 1 per cent of the total population. Though small in proportional terms, Maharashtra is also home to the largest number of Jains, Zoroastrians and Jews in India.

Notwithstanding the differences, the State of Maharashtra also has some interesting similarities with Punjab. Both have had very vibrant social and religious reform movements. While Punjab witnessed the rise of religious reform movements during the later years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such movements began in Maharashtra a little earlier. Along with Bengal, Maharashtra emerged as an important centre of western education and social reforms during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Names of early reformers like G.K.

Gokhale, M.G. Ranade and Jyoti Ba Phule are quite well known to students of Indian history. It was here that the question of caste inequality was forcefully raised by people like Jyoti Ba Phule and B. R. Ambedkar. This criticism of caste culminated in an important movement for religious conversion among the Mahars, an ex-untouchable community, under the leadership of B.R. Ambedkar.

It was in 1956 that B.R. Ambedkar led the conversion of almost the entire community of Mahars of Maharashtra to Buddhism. The Census of 1951 had counted only 2,487 Buddhists in the state of Maharashtra. This population swelled to 2.79 million in the next Census in 1961 and the number of Buddhists has continued to grow (see Table 2). Of the total Buddhist population of about 8 million (7,955,207 persons) in the entire country in 2001, almost three quarters (73.4 per cent) lived in Maharashtra. With the exception of a small minority, all were converts, also known as neo-Buddhists (See Table 3.1). Though some Dalits have converted to Buddhism in other parts of India, the neo-Buddhist movement has remained popular mostly amongst the Mahars of Maharashtra.

**Table 2: Growth of the Buddhist population in Maharashtra**

Year	Population of Maharashtra (total)	Buddhist population of Maharashtra	Proportion of total (%)	All-India Buddhist population (%)
1951	32,002,564	2,487	0.01	0.05
1961	39,533,781	2,789,501	7.05	0.74
1971	50,412,235	3,264,233	6.47	0.70
1981	62,783,000	3,946,149	6.39	0.70
1991	78,937,000	5,040,785	6.28	0.77
2001	96,878,627	5,838,710	6.10	0.80

Sources: Patwardhan, 1973; Mahana, 1985; Vijayannuni, 1995 and Census of India, 2001.

What prompted such a movement among the Mahars of Maharashtra? Who provided the leadership? What have been the developmental effects of the movement for the marginalized and poor among the ex-untouchable community of Mahars? With this movement, what kind of structures has evolved over the years that facilitate the development and socio-economic consolidation of this new community? These are some of the questions that we try to explore in this chapter.

## 3.2 The Mahars of Maharashtra

Broadly speaking, we can identify four different caste clusters in Maharashtra. The so-called upper castes (Brahmins, Banias, Kaisthas etc.) constitute about 3 to 4 per cent of the total population. The middle level castes (land-owning rural/dominant groups, the Maratha-Kunbis) comprise nearly 31 per cent. The third caste cluster, the 'Other Backward Classes' (OBCs) also has a substantial presence, with about 27 per cent of the total State population. The fourth caste cluster is comprised of the marginalized communities, the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). Though as many as 59 groups have been classified as Scheduled Castes in the State, a large majority come from four groups: Mahars, Mangs, Matangs and Charamkars.

According to the colonial Census of 1931,<sup>28</sup> people from the untouchable communities made up 16.5 per cent of the total population of colonial Maharashtra State, larger than any other caste group except for the Marathas, who constituted 20.2 per cent. Amongst the untouchable population, Mahars were the most numerous, alone accounting for about 11 per cent of the total State population. The so-called upper castes<sup>29</sup> together constituted only 6.6 per cent of the total. The predominance of Mahars in the total population of SCs in the State continues even today. As per the 2001 Census, among the 59 castes listed in the Schedule, Mahar, Mang, Bhambi and Bhangi together constituted 92 per cent, with Mahars alone accounting for 57.5 per cent (5,678,912 persons) of the SC population of Maharashtra.

Unlike some other "untouchable" groups, the Mahars of Maharashtra have not always been identified with a single occupation. They were the 'village servants', but some were also engaged in other tasks. They were ranked among the most important *balutedars* (a service caste) and, unlike most other *balutedars*, were entitled to *vatan* (rights over free/common land). *Balutedari*, a variant of the *jajmani* system, was constituted of various artisan castes (*balutedars*), who performed their traditional tasks in the name of serving the village. In the *jajmani* system, popular in north India, the services provided were technically for individual *jajmans*, who in most cases were landowners from a dominant caste, and each service provider (*kamin*) received payment from his master. The concept of *jajman* was not known in Maharashtra. As *balutedars*, or servants of the village, Mahars were gate-keepers, watchmen, auxiliaries to the police (in the event of theft), travellers' porters, guides to the next village and boundary referees. They were also in charge of summoning landholders to pay taxes, levying taxes, escorting taxes to the government treasury, sweeping roads, carrying death notices and

messages to other villages, bringing fuels to burning grounds and removing cattle carcasses (Pillai-Vetschera, 1994, p. 287; see also Gokhale, 1993, p. 32; Zelliott, 1970, p. 28-30). Though in theory the services of *balutedars* were provided to the village as a whole, in practice they were often secured by individuals from the dominant caste groups, *Patils* and *Kulkarnis* (Pillai-Vetschera, 1994, p. 287).

As pointed out by Jaffrelot (2004, p. 20), in terms of the local status hierarchy, Mahars were the first among the last. As part of payment for their service to the village, the Mahars were allowed to take their share from the first row of crops. In addition to their share of the harvest, as noted above, they also had a right to a *vatan* (an area of land free of tax). This piece of land was often of good quality and therefore they had the privilege of being able to cultivate and do their own farming, unlike *balutedars* from other Dalit castes. However, despite these 'privileges', Mahars continued to be treated as untouchables: they had to live outside the village, in the *maharwada* (Patwardhan, 1973, p. 33).<sup>30</sup> In addition, whenever they entered a village to collect food from their patron households, they were required to carry a stick with a bell hanging on it, so that the villagers could move away (Jaffrelot, 2005, p. 21). These humiliating practices continue to shape the memory of the neo-Buddhist activists even today. As some narrated to us in a group interview:

*They were subjected to a whole range of sumptuary regulations which prohibited them from carrying umbrellas, wearing shoes or certain kinds of apparel in the presence of their caste superiors, or making music as their marriage parties passed through the village. Though the force of these restrictions considerably eroded during the time of India's struggle for independence, their spirit certainly lingered on. The Mahars still were not allowed entry into the village temples or Hindu houses, and could never enjoy the festivals together with the so-called upper castes.*<sup>31</sup>

The process of their upward social mobility began only when they were able to move out of the villages into non-caste specific (secular) occupations, one of the most important of which was military service, initially in the army of the local rulers, the Peshwas, and later in the British army.

### **3.2.1 Mahars in the colonial army**

An important similarity between the case of Ad Dharmis of Punjab and the Mahars of Maharashtra was their experience with the British rulers. Though the nature of this experience was quite different, it was colonial rule that provided the initial impetus for their development. While in Punjab, the British

Cantonment provided new opportunities for business to the Chamar Dalits of Doaba, the Mahars gained from their direct recruitment into the colonial army.

According to Cohen (1990, p. 59), in the pre-mutiny years, Mahars constituted a fifth to a quarter of the entire Bombay Army and they fought in several battles for their colonial masters. In the words of another commentator:

Much praise was showered on the Mahar Sepoys of the Bombay Army who endured the rigours of the difficult marches when rations were low and disease was high among men and animals. Whether they were charging ahead or were besieged or taken prisoner-of-war, whether they were storming fortress or making tactical withdrawals, they always stood steadfast by their officers and comrades, never letting down the honour of their Regiments (Longer, 1981, p. 13).

However, after the mutiny of 1857, Mahars were de-listed from recruitment, when the Peel Commission, in its report on army reorganization, did not recognize them as a 'martial race', a status bestowed mostly on locally dominant/upper caste communities. By 1893, the recruitment of Mahars and other untouchable castes had completely stopped. "We cannot practically ignore it [the caste system], so long as the natives socially maintain it" (Cohen, 1990, p. 36)<sup>32</sup>, was the argument advanced by the Commission. The Bombay Army was thus "notified that the Mahars, together with a number of other classes.... would no longer be recruited to the Army. They could only get enlisted as bandsmen or clerks" (Longer, 1981, p.13).

However, the Mahars did not give up easily. They submitted a petition to the Viceroy in the year 1885, under the leadership of Gopal Baba Walangkar, a retired military officer, which compared the character of the Mahars to that of members of the higher castes and pleaded for their reinstatement in the military. However, the campaign was unsuccessful and it was only towards the end of World War I, when the British found it hard to recruit enough soldiers from the upper castes, that the 111 Mahars Regiment was initiated, although it was soon disbanded by the British "on the excuse of the economy" (see Farwell, 1989, p. 190; Keer, 1994 [1964], p. 336). The regiment was to be revived again in the year 1945.

Notwithstanding these ups and downs, their experience of recruitment into the colonial army played a critical and positive role in Mahar upward social mobility. Mahars benefited from their participation in a number of ways: it took them out of the villages, gave them a sense of autonomy and confidence, and enabled them to gain an education, which in turn also opened up employment opportunities in other areas of urban economy. They began to abandon their traditional caste-based occupations. As Zelliott observed:

During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, a substantial number of Mahars removed themselves from their traditional village service role. The establishment of British rule in [the] Bombay Presidency provided Mahars with the opportunity for service in the army, employment in cotton mills, ammunition factories, railroads, dockyards, construction work, and as servants in British homes (1972, p. 75).

Zelliott also refers to the 1921 Census, which recorded only 13.5 per cent of Mahars being employed in their traditional occupation. In contrast, as many as 55 per cent of Chambhars and 33.2 per cent of Mangs, two other major Dalit castes in Maharashtra, were reportedly employed in their traditional caste occupations (*ibid*, p. 75). This point has also been underlined by Jaffrelot (2004) in his work on the subject. He refers to an ethnographic study conducted by M. G. Bhagat, who reported that in the early 1930s, only 6.5 per cent of Mahars pursued their traditional occupations, as against 54 per cent of Chambhars, 62 per cent of Dhors, 79 per cent of Mangs and 100 per cent of Bhangis. Of the seventeen untouchable civil servants mentioned by Bhagat, fifteen were Mahars and only two Chambhars. In terms of education too, Mahars made up 67 per cent of the total untouchables who had some knowledge of the English language, as against only 16 per cent who were Chambhars. This social and economic mobility among the Mahars had an interesting impact on the educational status of the total Dalit population of the region. The highest rate of literacy among untouchables recorded during the 1921 Census was in the Bombay Presidency (4.1 per cent), much higher than in the Punjab (1.1 per cent) and even the Madras Presidency (3.5 per cent) (Zelliott, 1970, p. 7).

This understandably had an impact on their personal selves. Those who joined the Army experienced less caste prejudice. As Basham observes:

...within the closed circle of the regiment, caste prejudice was, if not actually absent, at least officially discouraged. According to army regulations no distinction was made between soldiers on the basis of their caste or community....Mahar officers were able to command men of the other castes, apparently without difficulty (Basham, 1986, p. 167).

Notwithstanding this experience of a small minority of Mahars, their social status in local society did not see any major improvement. Economic mobility in a caste society does not translate directly into higher social status. It may be useful to quote Zelliott once more:

It was their entry into the British army which proved significant for the subsequent history of the Mahar movement. It is important to gauge this significance. It consists not in any automatic elevation in the social hierarchy through military service, which indeed is ruled out in a hierarchical system governed by considerations of ascriptive status and ritual purity. It rather consists in the fact that military service at such an early date exposed them to British institutions much before the dissemination of the western culture took place on a large scale Zelliott (1970, p. 31).

The exposure to Western institutions and non-caste based (secular) employment, which gave a new sense of confidence to a section of the Mahars and created conditions for the subsequent emergence of social movements, eventually resulted in a movement for religious conversion and the search for a new identity in Buddhism. Though a newly emergent educated social class within the Mahar community provided the social context for this movement, an individual leader, B.R. Ambedkar, played a critical role in shaping the movement.

### 3.3 B.R. Ambedkar and the Mahar movement

B.R. Ambedkar was born into a Mahar family that had greatly benefited from recruitment into the colonial army. He was the Chairman of the committee that drafted the Constitution of India, and subsequently went on to become Law Minister in the first government of independent India.

B.R. Ambedkar was born in a military cantonment (Mhow) in the Indore district of present day Madhya Pradesh. His father, Ramji Sakpal, rose to become a *Subedar* Major, the highest rank that an Indian could hold in the British Army at that time. Ambedkar's mother too came from a family of soldiers. Her father and her six uncles had all been in the British Army at the same rank as her husband. Having grown up in a cantonment area, Ambedkar escaped much of the prejudice and violence of the caste system that his fellow Mahars experienced in typical rural settings in Maharashtra. However, he could not escape this reality for very long. His biographer, Dhananjay Keer, gives a vivid account of Ambedkar's first experience of the dark reality of caste and the shock it gave him. It happened while he was travelling outside the military cantonment, and had gone to meet his father in a distant village. Keer writes:

At the railway station, they hired a bullock cart to take them to the village, but hardly had the cart gone a few yards when the god-fearing touchable Hindu cart-man, to his wrath, came to know that the well-dressed boys were ... accursed Untouchables! In a fit of rage he threw them out on the road as one overturns the dust bins; for he felt they had polluted his wooden cart and destroyed the purity of his domestic animals! (Keer, 1994 [1964], p. 12).

During this trip Ambedkar was also “beaten black and blue” when a member of a touchable caste found him drinking water from a “public water course” (*ibid*, p. 13).

Fighting against caste-based prejudice and discrimination eventually became a major preoccupation for Ambedkar, a life-long mission. It was in order to fulfil this mission that he turned to religion, although his relationship with it was unusual. He critiqued Hinduism for giving legitimacy to caste divisions and hierarchy in society and instead embraced the Buddhist religion, in order to overthrow untouchability and the humiliation thrust upon the people of his community in the name of Hinduism. In order to achieve this, he worked tirelessly for the remainder of his life, not only as an intellectual and critic of Hinduism, but also as a leader and missionary to mobilize the humiliated people to struggle for a dignified existence.

Ambedkar had a long and interesting career as a student. He concluded his primary education at the cantonment school and his high school at Satara town in Maharashtra. Later, when his father was transferred by the army to Bombay, he enrolled at the Elphinstone College in Bombay, where he completed his B.A. degree in the English language. In 1913, he joined the army of the princely state of Baroda as a lieutenant. However, he wanted to pursue his studies, and after securing financial aid from the Maharaja of Baroda,<sup>33</sup> he went to Columbia University, New York, for a Master's degree, from there moving to the London School of Economics to study law. In 1917, before he could complete his studies at the LSE, he returned to India at the request of the Maharaja of Baroda, and rejoined the Baroda administration as a Military secretary to the Maharaja. Once again, he was haunted by his caste background, which meant that he could not find a decent house in which to live in the city of Baroda: his education abroad and a well paid job with the Maharaja could not obliterate his ‘untouchable’ identity. He eventually resigned and returned to England to complete his studies, this time supported by the Maharaja of Kolhapur.

Ambedkar presented his thesis on *The Problem of Rupee* at the LSE in 1922 and was awarded his degree a year later. In 1927, he was also awarded a Ph.D. by Columbia University for his thesis on *The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India*. With two degrees from two of the best centres of higher education of the world, Ambedkar was not only the first member of an untouchable community to reach that level of education, but also among the few Indians at that time to have achieved such distinction (Keer, 1994 [1964]).

He returned to India in 1923, registered at the Bombay Bar and started legal practice in the Bombay High Court the following year. However, his caste identity continued to be a factor in the legal profession. Many potential clients would not approach him simply because he was from an untouchable community. To supplement his income, he was forced to teach part-time. Like many other Indians of the time who had returned from abroad after completing their education, Ambedkar was attracted to the ongoing social reforms and political movements. However, unlike most others who were involved with religious reforms and the movement for freedom from British rule, he had a single point programme: to fight against the caste system and untouchability and to uplift his people to secure a life of dignity.

Christophe Jaffrelot (Jaffrelot, 2009; see also Jaffrelot, 2004) has identified four strategies that Ambedkar deployed in his struggle against caste inequalities and untouchability over the thirty years of his active political career. First of all, he worked to build a respectable identity for low caste groups, by producing an alternative history that could both explain their subordination without justifying it and give them a sense of dignity. As Jaffrelot writes:

Ambedkar tried to endow the lower castes with a glorious history of sons of the soil to help them acquire an alternative – not-caste-based – identity, to regain their self respect and overcome their divisions. In *The Untouchables, Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables?* (1948), Ambedkar refutes Western authors explaining caste hierarchy by resorting to racial factors.... He explains that all primitive societies have been one day or the other conquered by invaders who raised themselves above the native tribes. In breaking up, these tribes as a matter of rule give birth to a peripheral group that he calls the *Broken Men* (ibid.)

His second strategy involved engagement with “electoral politics” (ibid.). He actively campaigned to make the colonial rulers recognize the special case of the untouchable population, arguing that

untouchables should be represented in the democratic institutions that the colonial rulers were trying to put in place. This brought him into direct contact with 'mainstream' nationalist political leaders, such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, who were invariably upper caste Hindus. Though his relations with leaders like Gandhi were not cordial, Ambedkar's aggressive emphasis on caste made them recognize the significance of dealing with questions of caste and untouchability in independent India. It was as a result of these engagements that the present-day system of quotas (reservations) for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in legislative bodies exists.

The third important strategy that Ambedkar used to uplift his people was to work with rulers, from the British Raj to the 'Congress Raj'. Unlike the nationalist leaders, Ambedkar did not take an oppositional stance vis-à-vis the British. As Jaffrelot writes, he "tried hard to influence the governments in his personal capacity, whether they belonged to the British or to the Congress, for better serving the cause of the Untouchables" (ibid.). He had no hesitation in rejecting the movement for independence, which he saw as being dominated by upper caste Hindus. He worked with the British in various committees, with the hope of securing a better deal for his people. However, when he was offered a ministerial berth by Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, he accepted it. He was also the Chairman of Constituent Assembly of India and played an active role in framing the Constitution of independent India.

Finally, and most important, was his decision to convert, along with his people, away from Hinduism. Though it was only in 1956, a few months before his death, that he converted to Buddhism, he had never been comfortable or happy being a Hindu. It was in 1927, at a public meeting in the town of Mahad in the Konkar region of Maharashtra, that he had first declared:

We want equal rights in society. We will achieve them as far as possible while remaining within the Hindu fold or, if necessary by kicking away this worthless Hindu identity. And if it becomes necessary to give up Hinduism it would no longer be necessary for us to bother about temples (cited in Gore, 1993, p. 91).

This was also the year in which he began his political career and started mobilizing the Dalits of Maharashtra against the practice of untouchability. In his first appearance as a political activist at a conference of 'the depressed classes', on 20<sup>th</sup> March 1927 in Mahad, he demanded the abolition of untouchability and the caste system. He was supported in his efforts by some caste Hindus. It was

during this series of protests that, along with his supporters, he decided to drink water from a public source in the town, where those belonging to Dalit communities were not allowed to do so. Ambedkar's choice of the public water source was deeply symbolic - it was intended to show to the world the extent of discrimination faced by the people of his community by demonstrating that caste Hindus did not even treat untouchables equally with animals and birds to which, after all, water was naturally accessible.

This act resulted in a near riot in the town. The caste Hindus performed rituals to purify the tank, which made Ambedkar even more angry and critical of Hinduism. A few months later, on December 26<sup>th</sup>, 1927, he planned another demonstration in the town. During it, along with a large number of Dalits, he burnt the *Manusmriti* (the Hindu law book presumed to have been written by Manu). To spread his message to the larger public, he also started publishing a weekly paper *Bahiskrit Bharat* (Depressed India), in which, apart from articulating his position on the caste question, untouchability and Hinduism, he also wrote critically about the failure of the British government in its duty towards untouchables (Damle, 2003).<sup>34</sup>

Apparently, Ambedkar's opposition to Hinduism and his desire to convert to another religion was primarily driven by instrumental reasons. Given that the Hindus practised the caste system and treated certain communities as untouchables, and that this practice was sanctioned by the sacred texts of the Hindu religion, he believed that there could not be a place for him and the people of his community within Hinduism, in which they could feel dignified members of the faith. Though Hindu reformers of the time criticized the practice of untouchability, Ambedkar had little faith in their ability to achieve reform and even suspected their intentions. His frequent disagreements with Gandhi on this issue are quite well known to students of Indian history. For Gandhi and other Hindu reformers, it was important to keep untouchables within the Hindu fold in the interests of the larger politics of numbers. It was precisely for this reason that Gandhi did not want untouchables to have separate electorates and announced that he would fast unto death to prevent this in Pune in 1932. This led to the famous Poona Pact between Gandhi and Ambedkar, under which it was agreed that there would be no separate electorates for untouchables, as had been allocated to Muslims and some other religious minorities, but that because the electorate would be mixed, they would have reserved seats. As rightly pointed out by Jaffrelot, for Gandhi, the Poona Pact was not an agreement about giving due representation to the

untouchable communities in the electoral process but about making them accept that they were a part of Hinduism. This is clearly evident from his comment to Ambedkar in 1933: "In accepting the Poona Pact you accept the position that you are Hindus" (cited in Jaffrelot, 2004, p. 67).

Notwithstanding his differences with Gandhi and other Hindu reformers, Ambedkar continued his 'movement for acceptance by the caste Hindus' for several years. He supported the movements for temple entry being organized by his fellow untouchables. He himself organized a large procession to enter the Kala Ram Temple in Nasik in 1930. Though he was unsuccessful, he continued this movement for nearly five years and was able to mobilize thousands of untouchables. However, even when he was fighting for civil rights for the untouchables, he did not lose sight of the religious dimension of their subordination. He often attributed untouchability to the Hindu religion and its ideology. Radical reforms in Hinduism that would accommodate and include the untouchables were, in his view, simply not possible. He articulated this quite clearly and loudly in his speech at a Conference of the Representatives of Depressed Classes on October 13, 1935, in the small town of Yeola:

Religion is for man and not man for religion. If you want to organize yourself, change your religion. If you want to gain self-respect, change your religion. If you want to create a society that ensures cooperation, and brotherhood, change your religion. If you want to achieve power, change your religion. If you want equality, change your religion. If you want independence, change your religion. If you want to make the world in which you live happy, change your religion.

Why do you want to remain bound to a religion, which does not treat you as a human being? Why do you want to remain in a religion which prohibits you from entering its temples? Why do you want to remain under the religion which prohibits you from drawing water from public wells? Why do you remain in that religion which bars you from decent occupation and jobs? Why do you remain in that religion which insults you at every step?

The religion that teaches man to behave with man in an inhuman manner is not religion but infamy. The religion which does not recognize a human being as a human being is a curse. The religion in which the touch of animals is permitted but the touch of a human being pollutes, is not a religion but the mockery of religion. The religion that precludes some classes from education; forbids them to accumulate wealth and to bear arms is not a religion but tyranny. The religion which compels the ignorant to remain ignorant and the poor to remain poor does not deserve to be called as a religion (cited in Das, 1980, p. 61).

For himself, Ambedkar made a declaration in this meeting that though he was born a Hindu, he would surely not die a Hindu. He declared:

...Unfortunately for me I was born a Hindu Untouchable. It was beyond my power to prevent that, but, I declare that it is within my power to refuse to live under ignoble and humiliating conditions. I solemnly assure you that I will not die a Hindu (*ibid*, p. 108).

Notwithstanding his anger and despair, Ambedkar did not want this moving out from Hinduism or conversion to another religion to be an individual affair. He saw it as a social movement, and was aware of the fact that, while he was ready to leave Hinduism, the large masses of his community needed to be prepared for it. It was perhaps for this reason that he continued to support the campaigns for entry into Hindu temples. It was only after the failure of these campaigns that he proposed conversion out of Hinduism to the leaders of the 'depressed classes.'

### **3.3.1 From untouchables to Buddhists**

Even after the declaration of his intent, Ambedkar took more than twenty years to convert to Buddhism. However, what changed after his 1935 declaration was that he stopped participating in efforts directed at reforming Hinduism. While it was easy to reject Hinduism, finding an alternative was not. Further, though Ambedkar had been criticizing Hinduism, he did not criticize religion per se and did not think of a 'secular community' as the alternative. Though he was aware of Marxist writings, the idea of communism did not much appeal him. Instead, for him the way out of Hinduism had to be another religion, which would give untouchables a different religious identity.

Islam and Christianity had both attracted sections of the untouchable communities in the subcontinent, but Ambedkar was not very keen on converting to either. Conversion to these religions had not ended discrimination against Dalits. More importantly, it is possible that Ambedkar did not want to offend the mainstream nationalist leadership, which as noted above, was composed mostly of upper caste Hindus. The Indian nationalists, even some of those within the Congress, saw Islam and Christianity as foreign religions and, given the weak economic position of Dalits in different parts of the country, Ambedkar perhaps did not want any kind of schism to develop between the dominant groups and the Dalits (Ahir, 1995; Jaffrelot, 2004; Keer, 1994 [1964]). He seriously considered the possibility of converting to Sikhism and spent a good deal of time assessing the possible advantages and disadvantages, but finally gave up on Sikhism also. Despite its theological opposition to the

Brahmanical caste system, its practice had not disappeared amongst Sikhs and also Sikhism was confined to a small region within the subcontinent.

Buddhism appeared to be the most viable alternative. Apart from it being a part of the Indian 'native tradition', as a religious system, Buddhism was also undogmatic and philosophically open. Given that there was no strong Buddhist community anywhere in India at that time, he thought that converts would be able to make stronger claims to Buddhism than any other religious tradition. In the absence of an established orthodoxy, Ambedkar could also mould and interpret Buddhism to suit his own vision of a 'liberating' religious system. As Gail Omvedt (2004) points out, Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism was not only a challenge to Brahmanical Hinduism but also to existing interpretations of Buddhism. In fact, Ambedkar called it Navayana Buddhism, to mark its distinction from the three accepted 'ways' of Buddhism: Theravada (or Hinayana), Mahayana and Vajrayana. Navayana Buddhism was to eventually emerge as a powerful version of Buddhism in India.

It was in the year 1950 that Ambedkar for the first time asked his followers to celebrate Buddha Jayanti and also contributed an article to the *Mahabodhi* journal of Calcutta under the title "Buddha and the Future of his Religion." He argued in the article that he liked Buddhism because he found the religion of the Buddha to be rational, scientific and the epitome of liberty, equality and fraternity (Ahir, 1998, p. 112). In the same year, Ambedkar participated in the First Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, held at Kandy in Sri Lanka. In the year 1954, he visited Burma to participate in the Third World Fellowship of Buddhists held at Rangoon. It was after his return from Burma that he started focusing all his attention on plans for his conversion to Buddhism. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of May 1955, he founded the *Bhartiya Bauddha Mahasabha* (The Buddhist Society of India) to undertake preaching and propagation of Buddhism. He selected October 14<sup>th</sup>, the day of 'Dhamma Vijaya', the date on which Asoka the great had embraced Buddhism in 262 BC, as the day of his conversion. The city of Nagpur was selected for the event because it is believed to be the land of Nagas, the earlier Buddhists.<sup>35</sup> A large number of people gathered for the ceremony (about four lakh - 0.4 million). After the *deeksha* rites had been performed, Ambedkar took twenty-two vows, the first eight of which were dedicated to the renunciation of Hinduism and the Hindu gods. Addressing the vast gathering after his conversion, Ambedkar said:

I started the movement of renouncing the Hindu religion in 1935 and since then I have been continuing the struggle. This conversion has given me enormous satisfaction and pleasure unimaginable. I feel as if I have been liberated from hell (Ahir, 1998, p. 114).

For those who attended the ceremony and converted to Buddhism along with him, it was a moment of liberation. During our fieldwork for this research, a woman respondent who had witnessed the historic Nagpur conversion in Solapur described her experience:

*I went to Nagpur to attend the conversion ceremony when I was in the sixth month of my pregnancy. Along with me were many other women from Solapur. I remember the names of Sona Bai, Tai Bai, Shivsharan, Guna Bai, Khar Bhandare. Most of them are not there any longer. We all felt very proud and were singing the song, "Neela Zhanda Oonch Dhara, Dalitanchi Gatna Gadha, Junmaroodicha Deun Dhola, Jai Bhim Bola" (keep the blue flag high and straight; unite all the Dalits; come out of the old dogmatic traditions and say victory to Ambedkar).<sup>36</sup>*

A similar kind of excitement about the conversion ceremony can be seen in the writings of Sangharakshita, the British founder of an important neo-Buddhist institution. He writes:

...even the poorest, came clad in spotless white shirts and saris as had been prescribed for the occasion by their beloved leader. Some families had to sell trinkets in order to buy their new clothes and meet the expenses of the journey, but they did so gladly and set out for Nagpur with songs on their lips and hope of a new life in their heart.... By the end of the week 400,000 men, women and children had poured into Nagpur, with the result that the population had nearly doubled and the white-clad untouchables had virtually taken over the city (Sangharakshita, 1986, pp. 129-30).

Over the years, this day has become sacred for the neo-Buddhist community. Many of them proudly claimed it as the only event in world history to date when so many people have converted to a different religion at one time. The place where the conversions took place is called *Deeksha Bhoomi* and has become the most sacred place of pilgrimage for the neo-Buddhists of Maharashtra. They have erected a grand memorial Stupa at the venue, which every year is visited by neo-Buddhists from Maharashtra and other States of India to celebrate the day as *Dhammachakrapravartan divas*.

A few months later, on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1956, Ambedkar died at his residence in Delhi, at the age of 65. His body was taken to Bombay the same day and he was cremated the next day at Dadar. As would be expected, the ground where he was cremated, *Chaiyta Bhoomi*, has also become a sacred place

for his followers. On 24<sup>th</sup> November 1968, a grand memorial Stupa was erected at the venue and neo-Buddhists gather at it in large numbers on December 6<sup>th</sup> each year to celebrate the day as *Mahaparinirvan divas*. Ten days after Ambedkar's death, his followers organized another mass conversion in Bombay. By the time of the 1961 Census, 80 per cent of the Mahars of Bombay reported their religion to be Buddhism (Zelliot, 1996, p. 73). Though they had not yet been able to organize themselves into a community, they felt sufficiently inspired and confident to distance themselves from Hinduism. It was only later that they began to consolidate themselves as a community.

### **3.4 From 'untouchable' Hindus to neo-Buddhists: consolidating community**

As we have discussed above, Buddhism appeared to be the most appropriate choice for Ambedkar and his fellow comrades because it offered a 'rational' alternative to Hinduism. Unlike Hinduism, it does not advocate discriminatory practices against fellow human beings and unlike Marxist ideology it recognizes the human quest for spiritual values. Ambedkar was also critical of Marxism and its notion of class because, in his view, it could not deal with the specifics of Indian society. Caste cannot be reduced to class and he believed that class unity would be virtually impossible in a society divided on caste lines. While economic deprivation was a fact of life for a large majority of Dalits, caste prejudice operated irrespective of poverty or wealth, as he had learnt through his own experience of being discriminated against in urban professional life, despite being well educated and having well paid employment.

It was against this background that one should understand his efforts to build a community of believers united around a symbolic religious identity. When he converted to Buddhism, along with hundreds of thousands of his fellow Mahars, he also made them swear by certain principles, principles that would distance them from Hinduism and make them a community of believers with certain universal values. These commitments were:

1. I shall not recognize Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh as gods, nor shall I worship them.
2. I shall not recognize Ram and Krishna as Gods, nor shall I worship them.
3. I shall not recognize Gauri and Ganapati as gods nor shall I worship them.
4. I do not believe in the theory of incarnation of god.
5. I do not consider Buddha as the incarnation of Vishnu.

6. I shall not perform Shraddha [a Hindu rite that is carried out to ensure the safety of the deceased] nor shall I give offerings to god.
7. I shall not do anything which is detrimental to Buddhism.
8. I shall not perform any religious rites through the agency of a Brahmin.
9. I believe that all human beings are equal.
10. I shall endeavour to establish equality.
11. I shall follow the eight fold path of the Buddha.
12. I observe the ten Paramitas (observances) of the Buddha (the virtues in which a follower of the Buddha has to restrain himself).
13. I shall be compassionate to all living beings and I shall nurture them with care.
14. I shall not steal.
15. I shall not lie.
16. I shall not commit adultery.
17. I shall not drink liquor.
18. I shall lead my life striving to cultivate a harmonious blend of the three basic principles of Buddhism (Enlightenment, Precept and Compassion).
19. I thereby reject my old religion, Hinduism, which is detrimental to the prosperity of humankind, which discriminates between man and man and which treats me as inferior.
20. I fully believe that Buddhism is Saddhamma.
21. By my embracing Buddhism I am being reborn.
22. I hereby pledge to conduct myself hereafter in accordance with the teaching of the Buddha.

Before he died, Ambedkar worked on providing his fellow Buddhists with a text on Buddhism to which they could relate. During the last days of life, he worked hard to complete a book, *Buddha and His Dhamma* (Buddha and his teachings), in which he presented Buddhism as a religious philosophy for social action and change. Buddhism, according to Ambedkar, was a social and political emancipator. The book was published posthumously and over the years has become a sacred text for the neo-Buddhists. It has become virtually mandatory for every neo-Buddhist to keep a copy of the book in their homes, along with images/statues of Buddha and Ambedkar.<sup>37</sup>

This community of Navayana Buddhists has continued to grow ever since. Although most of those who have converted to Buddhism in Maharashtra come from a single caste of ex-untouchables, the Mahars, to which Ambedkar himself belonged, Ambedkar and Buddhism have over the years become

a source of inspiration for Dalit movements all over the country. Apart from Maharashtra, a large number of Buddhist Dalits can be found in States like Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and even Punjab. As shown in Table 2 above, the proportion of Buddhists in the Indian population has continued to increase and their total number has grown many fold.

We focused our field study on the neo-Buddhists of Maharashtra. One of the main things we observed is that conversion to Buddhism has not been a one-time affair for neo-Buddhists. Extricating themselves from the Hindu ritual system has not been easy for lay members of the 'new community'. However, their leaders have over the years worked hard to consolidate their community, socially, culturally and economically, evolving their own cultural and symbolic resources and institutions to encourage the economic, social and political development of the community.

Over the years, therefore, a new consciousness of being different from Hindus has become quite widespread among the Mahars. Several of our respondents described the ways in which they resist the past influence of Hinduism. For example, an activist in Sholapur said:

*I was around eight years when we began to hear about the Ambedkar movement in our village. Many of us were profoundly impressed by Ambedkar and were attracted to the Buddhist alternative. We rejected the Hindu social order, Hindu idols and temples. We melted the images of Hindu gods and goddesses in fire and made farming implements out of them. You will not find any Dalits in the towns and villages of Maharashtra celebrating festivals like Diwali and Holi.<sup>38</sup>*

Similarly, a woman respondent described her rejection of Hindu beliefs. In popular Hinduism, coconut, chilli and sindoor (the red powder used by married Hindu women in the middle of their foreheads as a sign of being married) are used for black magic (*jadoo-tona*). The sight of these objects lying in the street invariably generates fear. However, our Buddhist respondent asserted that she no longer believes in *jadoo-tona*. Instead, she reported that when she has come across such things in the street, she had invariably "*picked up the coconut, brought it home and fed it to my kids*".<sup>39</sup>

The Buddhist preachers spearheading the movement underlined the 'rational' aspect of the Buddhist way of life. As one of the active members of the movement, coordinator of a *Sunday Dhamma* (religious teachings), told us:

*We teach them the Buddhist way of life. We tell men and women that there is no atma [soul], paramatma [God] or supernatural being. There is only humanity. We tell them that Buddhism is not a religion in the religious sense. It deals with human minds. Our purpose is to awaken people to understand the real cause of sufferings and help them live happily and harmoniously. We make them understand that practising discrimination against a caste or a community is illegal and they should educate people against all kinds of discrimination practised in society.<sup>40</sup>*

Apart from inculcating a new religious consciousness among members, the neo-Buddhists of Maharashtra have also been working to develop their own institutions and an elite in order to develop a robust identity for the community.

### **3.4.1 Building community and institutions**

One of the first things to emerge as a source of symbolic identity among the neo-Buddhists in Maharashtra was a literary movement, an independent and autonomous group of Dalit writers, which has actively worked to develop a new intellectual tradition in the region. This movement was started by a group of 35 to 40 leading Dalit writers, poets, journalists, college teachers, lawyers and others from relatively prosperous sections of the community. They put together a platform for articulating the interests of the Dalit masses and their own ideas about the progress and development of their community. They started holding annual conferences under the banner of *Bouddha Sahitya Sammelan* (Buddhist Literary Conference). This was an attempt to evolve a parallel body which could challenge the dominance of the upper caste-dominated *Marathi Sahitya Sammelan* (Marathi Literary Conference). Dalit writers portrayed in their writings the glorious historical past of the ex-untouchables, especially Mahars, and eulogized their past cultural achievements. Over the years, some of these authors have emerged as iconic literary figures in the region and their writings have been translated into Hindi, English and many other foreign languages (Bhoite and Bhoite, 1977, pp. 60-75).

While such writers provided intellectual leadership for the new community and attempted to write an alternative history of the ex-untouchables, neo-Buddhists have also been active in other spheres of social and economic life. The community has evolved several structures and organizations, with the intention of initiating a process of institutionalization of neo-Buddhism as a separate religious community with its own rituals, institutions and identity. Foremost has been the Buddhist Society of India (BSI).

The BSI (*Bharatiya Bauddha Mahasabha*) was set up by B.R. Ambedkar in May 1955, nearly a year before his conversion. After his death in 1956, the leadership of the BSI was taken over by his son, Yashwant Rao Ambedkar (popularly known as *Bhaiyasaheb*). The head office of BSI is in Mumbai and its stated mission is to convert the whole of India into a Buddhist society, a *Prabuddha Bharat* (Buddhist India). It thus promotes Buddhism and has been trying to re-invent Buddhist rituals in its own way. In the year 1968, the BSI organized a *Dhammadaan*, a long procession from the birthplace of Ambedkar, with the purpose spreading the message of Buddhism and building of a funerary monument at the *Chaitya Bhoomi*. In the same year, Yashwant Rao Ambedkar also organized a national conference on Buddhism in Mumbai, at which he released a booklet - *Bauddha Jeevan Samskar Paath* (Cultural or Ideal Life of a Buddhist) – and to which the supreme leader of the faith, the Tibetan Dalai Lama, was also invited. The booklet provides Buddhists with a detailed set of directives on how to organize their everyday lives and sets out various life cycle rituals for believers. The neo-Buddhists have also brought out an annual calendar of important days for various rituals and festivals. To help the community develop its own autonomous code of everyday life, classes and study-circles on Dhamma, the Buddhist philosophy, and its Ambedkarite interpretation are organized. After the death of Yashwant Rao Ambedkar in 1977, his wife Miratai Ambedkar took over leadership of the organization.

Over the last fifty years or so, the BSI has organized six national conferences on Buddhism. It has also translated the *Bauddha Jeevan Samskar Paath* into Hindi, making it available to non-Marathi speaking Indians. Over the years, however, it has come to be closely identified with the Mahar caste community and does not particularly encourage others to join Buddhism. For example, it did not support the conversion of a section of the so-called de-notified tribes of Maharashtra to Buddhism in the year 2007.<sup>41</sup> Today, there are many other organizations which promote Buddhist *Samskar* (culture/sensibility), but the BSI has the largest following and most extensive institutional set-up in Maharashtra and beyond, with its main office in Mumbai.<sup>42</sup> Because the organization is largely run by volunteers, most of whom have full-time jobs and who work for the BSI only in the evening or during the weekends, on weekdays the office effectively opens only at 6 pm.

An important and interesting aspect of the neo-Buddhist movement has been its relationship with the state. The booklet referred to above directs members to always report their religion as Buddhism and nothing else:

During the Census, naming of a child and during their admissions in the school, every Buddhist in the column of caste/religion should always write only Bauddha, and they should also verify that it is written as such. If the concerned person denies mentioning Bauddha as their religion, he/she should immediately contact the local or the district office of the BSI (p. 15).

However, during our fieldwork in the town of Solapur we came across cases in which the BSI had issued letters to individual Buddhists certifying that “Before converting to Buddhism he/she was a Hindu Mahar”. When we inquired about this to the national secretary, his response was very candid:

*...the reservation that the Buddhists get in India is only on the basis that they are Scheduled Caste converts. We do not want the people of our community to lose this benefit simply because of their being Buddhists. But it also depends on individual choice. There are many Buddhists who no longer want the benefits of reservations/quotas and do not ask for such letters from us.<sup>43</sup>*

Another important institution that has been set up by the community and has been actively involved with the spread of the Buddhist religion in Maharashtra during the post-Ambedkar period is the Bauddha Jan Panchayat Samiti (BJPS). Though it can be seen as an offshoot of the Mahar Jati Sewa Sangh (a caste association of the Mahars), which was set up in 1938 by Mahar military pensioners, Ambedkar transformed it in 1941 into an institution for social change. Subsequently, it became the BJPS and took up the task of spreading Buddhism. Today, it has almost 750 branches in Mumbai and the surrounding areas, each of which functions as a community organization with a membership of between 100 and 500. This organisation’s active links with the Buddhist community have made it a potent force working for change in the social consciousness of the Mahar Buddhists. According to Mr. Srikant Talwadkar, general secretary of the organization, its prime purpose is:

*to create awareness about education among students and parents; provide financial support and other assistance for poor students; settle family disputes; eradicate blind faith and superstitions; and raise consciousness among community members (awakening of the society).<sup>44</sup>*

The BJPS is particularly active in the urban areas. It has played an important role in helping people to accept the new Buddhist traditions, from offering prayers to performing marriages and other activities. However, its impact has largely been in the cities, such as Bombay, Nagpur, Aurangabad, Pune and some areas of the Konkan region of Maharashtra.<sup>45</sup>

Another institution in this category is Bhikkhu Sangha's United Buddhists Mission, which also acts as the regional centre for the World Fellowship of Buddhists. This was established by Mr. Bhadant Rahula Bodhi, who works and lives in Mumbai. As he told us:

*Bhiku Sangh is an organization that creates Bauddha Bhikshus [Buddhist priests], who explain the principles of Buddhism to lay people; make them understand the five precepts, ten virtues and teach them how to celebrate Buddhist festivals. Every Buddhist locality should have a Buddha Vihar and every Buddha Vihar must have a Bauddha Bhikhu. In Mumbai there are more than seven hundred Buddha Vihars. There is a small Buddha Vihara in every locality. There are Budha Vihars in other parts of Maharashtra also, but Bauddha Bhikshus are not available everywhere....*<sup>46</sup>

Elaborating on the activities of Bhikkhu Sangha's United Buddhists Mission, Anuradha Rokde, another member of the organization added:

*First we started going to different slums and started collecting children to teach them about how to live their life as Buddhists. Every Sunday our vehicle used to go to these places and bring children here at the Sarvodaya Vihar. Though we follow the prescribed syllabus, our main focus is to infuse a sense of confidence among them. We tell them that even living in a slum or a village you can become a doctor or a lawyer. This has had a good impact. Today even the children of poor can read and write. Anybody who is ready to struggle can become a big name. Our main purpose is to encourage them to study hard, to change their attitude towards education. We tell them stories, how Babasaheb and others have struggled hard to reach to the top.*<sup>47</sup>

The Bhikkhu Sangha also educates people on the need to be philanthropic. It stresses the importance of donations, even if one is poor: "...even one rupee, one fistful of rice or one bread is enough".<sup>48</sup>

The Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangh Sahayak Gan (Association of the Friends of the Buddhist Order of the Three Worlds) is another organization that has played an important role in promoting the neo-Buddhist movement in Maharashtra. It was established in 1979 by Sanghrakshita, an English Buddhist monk and an admirer of Ambedkar. Initially active in the Nagpur district alone, its work has spread to the entire State under the name of Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha (TBM), with a head office in Pune. Like most other Buddhist organizations, TBM is also involved with cultivating a distinct cultural and spiritual life among the neo-Buddhists of Maharashtra. It underlines that an understanding of Buddhism is about building a good and just society. As one of their activists said:

*Buddha was actually a human being like us, and when he practised his philosophy he just developed himself as an example of how human life should be lived.... All the Buddhist practices emphasize the value of how we treat another human being. That made me to understand that nobody can be a born Buddhist, it has to be learnt and practised.*<sup>49</sup>

TBM is not only a religious body, it also has a number of social programmes. In 1986, it established the Bahujan Hitay Trust (majority welfare trust, discussed below). It also runs hostels for student, crèches, kindergartens, clinics and community libraries; and organizes lectures, health camps, adult education programmes and cultural programmes. It has programmes to support self-employment and runs thrift societies (*bachat garh*) for women. Most of these social programmes are funded by the London-based Karuna Trust. Its work is carried out through neo-Buddhist community centres, 72 of which are located in Maharashtra and another eight in Goa, Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat.

We visited one of the hostels for girl students. It had four wardens (three of whom were from the Buddhist community) and about 90 students, and appeared to be a well-maintained and active establishment. Though admission is open to all, a large majority of the students were Buddhist Mahars. The students were well versed in Buddhist practices and exhibited a great sense of confidence and pride about being what they are. They all wanted to be professionals, such as doctors, teachers or lawyers. In 2001, TBM also established a training institute at Nagpur (Nagarjun Training Institute), where it runs a year-long residential course in Buddhism and social work. The course is called *Dhamma Sekhiya* (religious education) and its contents include training in Buddhist teachings and practices; basic teachings from Pali and Buddhist Sanskrit sources; training in Buddhist ethics, basic meditation practices, puja and devotional practices; training in Ambedkar's approach to Buddhism; an introduction to social work and the application of Buddhist principles to that work; and developing proficiency in the English language.

Over the seven years prior to the study, the institute had trained 495 students coming from nineteen India States and different caste backgrounds. Of these, 145 were from Maharashtra. TBM is keen to take the message of Buddhism beyond the Mahar Dalits and gives preference to non-Mahar applicants because, according to one of the TBM coordinators, its identification with the Mahars has discouraged other Scheduled Caste communities from becoming Buddhists: "*The ultimate aim of TBM is to work for all SC communities and make them Buddhist*".<sup>50</sup> Similar views were expressed by other members

of TBM, which is slowly trying to become an organization focused on the empowerment of all Dalits. It was reported that some of their members keep watch on cases of caste-based violence and if they come across an atrocity, they intervene and make sure that a police case is registered. The TBM had 197 full-time workers and around 244 part-time volunteers in the State of Maharashtra at the time of the study.

Apart from the relatively large organizations, there are also local level groups that promote Buddhist philosophy and rituals and work to build a neo-Buddhist community.<sup>51</sup>

### **3.4.2 Education and development**

One of the most important slogans given by Ambedkar to India's 'untouchable people' was "to educate, organize and agitate". Of these three, education came first. Ambedkar's personal social mobility was to a large extent made possible by the fact that he was able to study in some of the best educational institutions of the world. Even today he is a role model for Dalits and a source of inspiration for his followers.

#### **■ People's Education Society**

The People's Education Society (PES), which was established by Ambedkar in Bombay in 1945, works as a champion of education, and has produced several members of the Buddhist elite by establishing a chain of educational institutions in the State. During the lifetime of Ambedkar, the PES had already set up seven such institutes:

- i. Siddhartha College of Arts, Science and Commerce, Bombay
- ii. Siddhartha College of Commerce and Economics, Bombay
- iii. Siddhartha College of Law, Bombay
- iv. Milind *Mahavidyalaya* (College), Aurangabad
- v. Milind Multipurpose High School, Aurangabad
- vi. Siddhartha Night High School, Bombay
- vii. Sant Gadge Maharaj *Vidyarthi Vasatigriha* (Boys Hostel), Pandharpur

It has continued to actively pursue the agenda of building an educational infrastructure and has established another 28 institutions during the post-1956 period, including schools, colleges and hostels (see Appendix 2). Over the last decade or so, the PES has been trying to to expand its

geographical scope and has established a college in the name of Dr. Ambedkar in Patna, Bihar. Apart from enabling Dalit students to access good quality higher education, the Society provides free hostels, scholarships, books and other facilities to deserving candidates from Scheduled Caste backgrounds.

We visited two of the colleges being run by PES, one each in Mumbai and Pune. In Mumbai we visited the Siddhartha College of Arts, Science and Commerce, the oldest college established by the PES, which was established in Mumbai in 1946 by Ambedkar himself, although it was able to become affiliated to Mumbai University only in 1960. The total number of teaching staff in the college is 85 and the number of students 3,700. The principal of the college, a non-Buddhist, told us about the contribution that it has made to the education of students from poor and marginalized communities:

*We have a majority of students from SC (primarily Buddhist) communities. We do not deny admissions to students from other communities. However, the number of non-SC students seeking admission to this college has always remained very low. The college has several schemes of scholarships for the SC students and it always makes additional effort to uplift these students educationally. Some of our students have done very well in public life. They include Mr. Buta Singh (Chairman of the National Commission for Scheduled Castes), Ratnakar Gaikwad (a senior civil servant in Mumbai) and several others.<sup>52</sup>*

Another member of staff presented the college as part of the movement of the ex-untouchable communities of Maharashtra, “*an institution taking forward the liberating and development agenda of Ambedkar*”.

In Pune we visited the Dr. Ambedkar College of Arts and Commerce, which was established on 27<sup>th</sup> September 1985. It has a total staff of 37, of which nearly 60 per cent were from the ex-untouchable communities, mostly Buddhist Mahars. The same was the case with students in the college, nearly 60 per cent from the Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe or De-notified Tribal communities. The proportion of Buddhists among the total students was nearly 45 per cent.<sup>53</sup> Apart from general teaching, the college also organizes special lectures on Buddhism, celebrates Buddhist festivals and makes students participate in Buddhist prayers in the mornings. Though the college had students from all castes and communities, we were told that there has never been any caste antagonism or conflict on the campus.

### ■ Takshashila Vidyalaya

Activists of the neo-Buddhist movement have also been working at the level of school education and Takshashila Vidyalaya is one such institution. The school was set up in 1971 by the Mahamahind International Dhammadoot Society (MIDS) in the town of Ulhasnagar in Maharashtra. It began with 35 students but now has nearly 3,000. Talking about the history of the school, the president of the MIDS told us:

*Ulhasnagar is an SC concentrated area and there were very few schools in the town. We had a modest beginning but we kept growing over the years and today we go up to junior college. Our efforts were recognized by the State government and from the year 1982 we started getting aid for payment of salaries and to meet other expenses. A large majority of our students (nearly 95 per cent) come from the Scheduled Caste category, and of these nearly half are Buddhists. Though we began with Marathi as the medium of instruction, we now have a separate wing teaching in the English medium. A large majority of our teachers are also from within the community. Of the total staff of 150, around 90 are Buddhists and another 50 or so from other SC categories. Only 5 to 7 members of our staff are from the non-Dalit communities. ...we do not provide religious education, but our focus is certainly to make people aware of Buddhism. Thus we teach them Pali language, which is all about Buddhism.<sup>54</sup>*

When we were in the school, we met with a Buddha Bhikkhu who trains students in meditation and told us more about the religious side of the education provided:

*We organize a shramner shivir [Buddha Bhikkhu training camp] for ten days every six months, where nearly 40 students are trained in the Buddhist way of life and rituals. During this period, students of other schools also join us. We tell them how a true Buddhist should live his/her life. ...Besides this we also organize a meditation camp every Sunday. The Sunday camp is open to all and a good number of people of different age groups join us to practise meditation.<sup>55</sup>*

Ulhasnagar has over the years emerged as an important political centre for the Buddhist Mahars of Maharashtra. The town has been in the news because of the so-called Khairlanji massacre in 2006, and the protests following it, when a Buddhist Dalit family were killed by members of the local upper castes.<sup>56</sup> It was here that a train was set on fire by angry Dalit protestors.

Apart from these relatively big institutions in large cities, we noticed a kind of 'education movement' among the neo-Buddhists in smaller towns as well. In fact, opening and running schools has emerged

as an entrepreneurial activity among the educated neo-Buddhists of Maharashtra. For example, Rajabhau Sarvode, a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) from the Republican Party of India (Athavale) group,<sup>57</sup> is a well-known entrepreneur who has made his fortune by running several schools in the town of Solapur. Mr. Sarvode accepted this and admitted that “*although I prefer Buddhist and SC students, it [education] is also my source of income*”.<sup>58</sup> However, for most private schools run by neo-Buddhists, funding is reported to be a serious problem. Nevertheless, the proprietors of such schools state that they did not wish to give up for political reasons - most of them are dedicated to the provision of education because, following Ambedkar, they see it as an important means of liberation for the ex-untouchable communities. This emphasis on education among the neo-Buddhists has indeed made a difference: as is evident from the 2001 Census, the educational status of neo-Buddhists is better than that of the Bhangis and Mangs, the Hindu Scheduled Castes (see Table 3). A slightly larger proportion of Mayar children in the 5-14 year age group are attending school than of the children of all SC groups in the State of Maharashtra (81.5 per cent compared to 79.3 per cent).

**Table 3: Educational levels attained by major Scheduled Castes in Maharashtra (2001)**

Name of SC	Middle School %	School Graduates (up to class X or XII) %	College and University Graduates %
All SCs	16.6	20.5	4.8
Neo-Buddhists/Mahars	17.2	22.1	5.3
Bhangis	18.8	13.5	1.6
Mangs	14.1	14.2	2.4

Source: [http://censusindia.gov.in/Tables\\_Published/SCST/dh\\_sc\\_maha.pdf](http://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/dh_sc_maha.pdf) (Accessed: July 27, 2009).

### 3.4.3 Religious mobilizations and economic development

While education has been rightly identified as an important area of intervention for infusing confidence and skills for a better social, cultural and economic life, the neo-Buddhists have also been investing in alternative routes to economic development and undertaking initiatives to enable individual members of their community to increase their prosperity.

### ■ Siddhartha Sahkari Bank

One of the initiatives for economic development was to set up a cooperative bank in Pune, the Siddhartha Sahkari Bank Ltd. Explaining the thinking behind this, the Chairman said:

*...In the post-liberalized era, reservations or quotas in government jobs are not going to be of much use for the Scheduled Castes. Though education in India is expanding, employment opportunities, particularly in the government sectors, were actually on [the] decline with growing privatization and liberalization. So we, the Buddhist people, Dalit people, the Scheduled Caste people, thought that we should find our own resources and create jobs by our efforts. We cannot improve our social condition unless we can improve our economic conditions. We have been poor for long but we would not like our next generation to remain so. It was with this in mind that we started our bank. With the bank we can provide financial support to the educated and talented young members of our community to start their own businesses, small businesses like purchasing a vehicle for transport business, opening a small shop etc.<sup>59</sup>*

It was in the year 1997 that about fifteen members of the community met in the city of Pune<sup>60</sup> and decided to start the bank. It was in its twelfth year of operation at the time of our fieldwork and appeared to be working smoothly. Being a bank of the 'backward classes', it had been allowed a 50 per cent concession on reserve deposit capital on condition that it maintains 50 per cent or above membership from the Scheduled Castes. Apart from helping new entrepreneurs to start their businesses and old ones to expand, it has also advanced loans for educational purposes. As the chairman claimed:

*....we give loans to our people at lower interest rates and help them fulfil their dreams. Nearly 75 per cent of our customers are Buddhists, and they feel very proud of their association with our bank. Even when for some legal hitch we are not able to give them [a] loan they do not feel disappointed because we speak to them in a different language. These people are our people. This bank is our bank. This bank exists because of Dr. Ambedkar's vision. We are all attached to it emotionally.*

*Though we started our first branch in Bhavani Peth area, a relatively poor locality, today we have a branch in the Sadashiv Peth, a Brahmin-dominated area. This branch generates the highest deposit of all our branches. One of the reasons for starting our own bank was to show to the Brahmins that it is not only the savarnas [upper castes] who can establish and run banks, we too could do it. Our community is increasingly becoming self-sufficient. We can manage our affairs, without their patronage or support. The bank is run by the Buddhists/Scheduled Castes and for the Buddhists/Scheduled Castes.<sup>61</sup>*

The bank currently has five branches in Pune city. Except for the Sadashiv Peth branch, all the others are located in areas where there are large numbers of Buddhists/Scheduled Castes. Declaring its motto “a new economic direction for the development of the society”<sup>62</sup>, the Annual Report of the bank for the year 2008 proudly claims:

...the bank is running with a deposit capital of Rupees four hundred billion and a total reserve capital of Rs. 20 billion. There are 6422 share holders and it has disbursed loans of Rs. 228 billion. The running capital of the bank is in 10.41 billion.<sup>63</sup>

We were told that there are today twenty such cooperative banks and credit societies supporting Buddhists and other SCs in their endeavours to increase their prosperity in the State of Maharashtra today. In order to bring together similar banks/credit societies from other parts of the country, they have formed an association called the All India Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Co-Operative Banks and Credit Societies Federation Ltd, with headquarters in New Delhi.

#### ■ Making it public

Having grown in numbers and geographical spread across the State of Maharashtra, yet being ignored by the mainstream media, the neo-Buddhists started their own means of communication, especially newspapers. These carry news about the community and their perspectives on what is happening in the world and inform the larger public about the community and its everyday affairs. Today, there are several newspapers managed and run by neo-Buddhists in Maharashtra.

The editor of one such newspaper, Anil Pawar, proudly told us in an interview:

*The Mahars in Maharashtra are only second to Brahmins in terms of education and readership. Our movement had both manpower and organization, but what it needed was its own media. Some of our brothers started similar enterprises earlier too, but in their commercial interest they took a stand similar to the mainstream media. The views and interests of our community were not adequately represented. Therefore, we started our newspaper in October 2005. ...Our agenda is very clear...our focus is to give importance to the interests of the community members and to build ... confidence in our community people. However, we are not completely confined to the boundaries of our caste. We also write on other issues.<sup>64</sup>*

During our visit to the office of *Vrittaratna Samrat*, another such newspaper, we noticed that this publication was filled with local community news, appeals, messages, guidelines and even advertisements by and for Buddhists. It is completely managed and run by Buddhists, with sixteen paid office staff and two paid reporters. One of the staff told us about the newspaper:

*Our newspaper does not have a huge readership. There are perhaps very few people outside our community who read this paper. But we still are determined to go ahead. We are running at a loss of Rs. 40,000 per day. But we are running it only for the welfare of the Buddhist people and for giving them a powerful voice. Therefore, we have named the sub-title of our newspaper as 'Samanya Janancha Buland Aawaz' [Common People's Strong Voice].<sup>65</sup>*

Another newspaper in this category is *Bahunjan Maharashtra*, which is run by the Bahujan Hitay Trust.

#### ■ Bahujan Hitay Sangh<sup>66</sup>

The *Bahunjan Hitay Sangh* (Association for the Welfare of the Majority) is another organization working for development of the community through religious mobilization. It was started in the year 2007 by senior government officers from the community, and all the members of its governing body are Buddhist converts.<sup>67</sup>

*This organization has a panchsutri karyakram (five dimensional programme): first, to propagate Dhamma; second, to make education accessible; third, strengthening [the] economic profile of the Buddhist community; fourth, empowering women; and fifth building a co-operative movement.*

*To spread the message of Buddha and Ambedkar, we are planning to build a big Buddha Vihar in every district of Maharashtra. For making education accessible, we are planning our own schools and colleges. For economic development of our people, we are trying to develop an industrial cluster for entrepreneurs from SC, ST and OBC categories in every district of Maharashtra. We are also working for the development of credit co-operative societies which would provide financial support to these emerging entrepreneurs and short-term credit to our people in rural areas. For women's empowerment, we have already started thrift societies (Mahila Bachat Garh or Women Savings House) and vocational training programmes. We are particularly targeting the families that lost their means of livelihood after the mills were closed down in cities like Solapur.<sup>68</sup>*

*In order to strengthen the co-operative movement, we are setting up consumer societies, co-operative banks and credit societies. At present we have three co-operative consumer societies running in Solapur, one each at Kumtha Naka, Teachers Housing Society and Pandrapur Choak. They have nearly three thousand members. Though not all of them [the members] are Buddhists, we approach [the work] with Buddhism principles. Being a Buddhist is not a precondition for membership. This is our way of cultivating Buddhism into their life.<sup>69</sup>*

Apart from these activities in the social, cultural and economic spheres, aimed at building or consolidating a strong community, the neo-Buddhists have also been actively involved with electoral politics. They established their own political party, the Republican Party of India, and have been regularly contesting elections for the State Assembly as well as the national parliament. It was Ambedkar himself who conceived the idea of a Republican Party of India, but it was formally launched only in October 1957, a year after his death. However, the RPI never succeeded in becoming an independent political force in the State and has only managed to win a small number of seats in the State Assembly through alliance politics. It has come to be identified with Mahars and Mahar Buddhists and has rarely been able to reach out to other Dalit castes, or to appeal to larger groups in the region. It has also been internally divided into various factions.<sup>70</sup> It was only with the rise of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the leadership of which also advocates Buddhism as an alternative religious identity for Dalits, that Dalit politics emerged as a viable force in electoral politics. However, the stronghold of BSP has so far been in north India.

### 3.5 Concluding remarks

While interviewing activists and members of the neo-Buddhist movement in Maharashtra, we noticed the discomfort that many of our respondents seemed to feel every time we used the word Dalit to describe them or their movement. It was in Solapur that some of them openly confronted us and expressed their dissatisfaction with the word 'Dalit'. A senior member of the TBM in Solapur articulated this position quite sharply:

*...we are totally against being addressed or described as Dalits. We do not see ourselves as depressed and backward, as the word connotes. It reminds us of our depressed status in [the] caste hierarchy. We do not see ourselves as inferior to Brahmins or any other caste or community. Our struggle is to regain our lost dignity and self-respect. How can we achieve this if we keep describing ourselves as Dalits? How*

*can we become Buddhists or understand Buddhism if we keep looking at ourselves through such negative terms? Please avoid such words.<sup>71</sup>*

This was surprising to us, because the term Dalit was first used by the Ambedkarites in Maharashtra and it became popular in different parts of India during the late 1980s and 1990s in opposition to the Gandhian name for the ex-untouchables, Harijan (son of God). Political leaders of the Scheduled Castes in India found the expression Harijan too patronizing and apolitical. In contrast, the word Dalit conveyed their experience of having been oppressed and fighting against the oppressive social order, for dignity. Interestingly, some of our neo-Buddhist respondents also felt uncomfortable with the official title, Scheduled Caste. This was also surprising because the neo-Buddhists of Maharashtra had struggled hard to be included in the official list of Scheduled Castes, despite their religion being Buddhist, and it was only in the 1990s that their demand was finally accepted by the Government of India. The Indian Constitution had originally given the status of Scheduled Caste only to Hindus, extended to the Sikhs in 1956. Less than twenty years later, a prominent neo-Buddhist activist, Vilas Vagh, seemed to be speaking a different language. As he told us in an interview in Pune:<sup>72</sup>

*Though their numbers may be small, there are many amongst the neo-Buddhist who have begun to feel that they no longer require reservations or quotas and they no longer want to be listed as Scheduled Castes.*

This reflects the confidence that the neo-Buddhist movement has been able to infuse in its members. Though Ambedkar had initially looked at religious conversion from a purely instrumental perspective, his Buddhism became a way of exploring the epistemology of an alternative religious identity and means of achieving socio-economic development. Though they rarely refer to the classical example of the Protestant spirit that Max Weber referred to when trying to explain the success of capitalism in Western Europe, the neo-Buddhist Mahars also seem to link their success in education and other avenues of material life to their religious difference.

Conversion to Buddhism has made a positive impact on almost all aspects of the ex-untouchable community of Mahars of Maharashtra. It was almost always with a sense of pride and without regret that they claimed to have rejected Hinduism. In fact, some of them underlined that, had they stayed within the Hindu fold, they would have remained untouchables, at the bottom of Indian society. Unlike the other Scheduled Castes, their being Buddhists has in their view put them at par with the middle and upper castes of Indian society. They also feel proud of the fact that, even though their number is

small as a proportion of the total population of India, they have been able to bring Buddhism back to Indian soil.

However, not everything is rosy for the neo-Buddhists of Maharashtra. Despite the efforts of different organizations actively involved with the re-socialization of community members, Hindu gods and rituals continue to be popular. Similarly, despite the education movement and attempts at producing an entrepreneurial class among the Buddhists, a large majority of them continue to live in poverty and lack any productive assets. The neo-Buddhists are among the poorest of the religious groups in India. As per the Consumption Expenditure Survey of NSSO (National Sample Survey Office) 2004-2005, Buddhists were the poorest religious group, with 40.6 per cent of households living below the official poverty line, against the national average of 28.3 per cent. In urban areas, they were better off, with 28.6 per cent of households below the poverty line (Muslims, with 41.4 per cent, had the highest incidence of poverty), but their poverty levels were above the national average for urban areas (25.6 per cent) (as calculated by Amit Thorat, 2008, p. 7). This, of course, reflects the ongoing legacy of their earlier caste position.

Further, even though the religious self-image of the neo-Buddhists has experienced a nearly complete change, a large majority of the 'others', particularly 'upper-caste Hindus', continue to look at them as they did before their conversion. Though Hindus now often call the group 'Mahar Buddhists', there is very little substantive change in their perceptions. The knowledge of this not only annoys the neo-Buddhists, it also creates a ground for social conflict. The brutal killings of members of a Dalit family in Khairlanji in 2006 and the widespread violent protests by the neo-Buddhists in reaction is just one example (see Jaoul, 2008). Some social scientists and critics have also tended to describe the movement as a purely caste movement, confined to the Mahars of Maharashtra. While to some extent this may be true, the form and substance of the movement is much more than a mere assertion of caste identity - it has empowered the neo-Buddhists socially, culturally and economically and has enabled them to identify with the larger community of Buddhists in different parts of the world. Along with Ambedkar's philosophy, Buddhism is a source of inspiration and an alternative identity for upwardly mobile individuals and communities of ex-untouchable origins in the entire subcontinent. The poor and marginal always want to escape their social and economic situation, but they also aspire to dignified ways of self-representation, for themselves as well as for others. Given that religion

continues to be an important source of identity in India, but also has a close affinity with caste in Hinduism, the question of religious identity is almost as critical for the ex-untouchables as caste and untouchability. It is in this context that conversion to Buddhism has been a positive, purposeful and politically mobilized strategy that has demonstrated the potential to liberate converts from the system of caste hierarchy.

## 4 Concluding comments

Caste has for a long time been considered an important aspect of India's social order. Notwithstanding significant variations across regions, the institution of caste has shaped structures of opportunity across the subcontinent. It has been an important aspect of Indian cultural and religious life, particularly for the majority Hindu population. The ritual and religious life of ordinary Hindus has been governed by the logic of caste differences and division. As has been pointed out by students of the caste system, the core features of the system have been the ideas of 'pure' and 'impure': their dialectical unity has shaped the social structures influenced by Hinduism and produced a hierarchy of social groups marked by rigid social inequality.

Given that the caste hierarchy was legitimized and reproduced within the religious framework of classical Hinduism, those who have propagated egalitarian values have had to confront the dominant Hindu religious establishment. Though the caste system is often presented as an unchanging ancient reality, which began to undergo changes only during the colonial period, a closer look at the pre-colonial history of the subcontinent reveals several social and religious movements against caste. For example, some of the so-called Bhakti poets and saints not only questioned the legitimacy and relevance of Brahmanical ritualism, but also offered alternative religious value systems and modes of social organization (Omvedt, 2003b, 2008; Patwardhan 1973). These were not mere cases of individual 'revolt' - some of them attracted large numbers of people and became popular movements for social change.

However, it was indeed during the colonial and post-colonial periods that the caste system began to be attacked politically and more systematically.<sup>73</sup> Interestingly, even during this period anti-caste movements have invariably taken and continue to take religious forms. However, while these movements have had a religious format, they have engaged with 'secular' questions of development and social change much more directly than earlier movements. Their explicit objective is the empowerment and uplift of the historically excluded and marginalized sections of the Indian/Hindu population. The two Dalit religious movements studied in this research are examples of such contemporary religious movements. Located in two different regions, they have both significant similarities and some important differences.

Both the movements emerged during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and were made possible by changes introduced by the colonial rulers. It was with the institutionalization of a new non-caste based (secular) economy by the colonial rulers that it became possible for many Dalits to move out of their traditional occupations. While the Mahars of Maharashtra found dignity in employment in the British Army, the Chamar Dalits of Punjab gained it by participating in the new market for leather goods created by the growing demand for boots for the colonial army.

More importantly perhaps, British rule also introduced secular education, which in principle was available to everyone. For instance, B.R. Ambedkar was able to go to a formal school and then to some of the top universities of the world, because the new schools did not refuse admission to a child simply because s/he came from an untouchable family/community. Similarly, Mangoo Ram, leader of the Ad Dharm movement in Punjab, would not have been able to go to California if he had not first acquired a formal education in a modern school.

The third important factor common to early 20<sup>th</sup> century Punjab and Maharashtra was the emergence of social reform movements. Even though most of these movements were led by members of the upper caste elites of different religious communities, they created an atmosphere in which the legitimacy of the caste system could be questioned. Some directly encouraged education of the ex-untouchables, admitted them into schools and provided them with material support. Mangoo Ram, for example, initially studied in a school run by the Hindu reformist organization, Arya Samaj. Similarly, Ambedkar was able to secure a scholarship to study abroad because of the new reformist agenda adopted by some of the local *rajās* (kings).

Another important fact common to both the movements is that they emerged within Dalit communities and were led by newly educated and globally travelled individuals who, despite having moved out of the caste-based occupational structure, had themselves experienced untouchability and the humiliations that went with it. Their exposure to the Western world gave them the experience of living in a non-caste society, which perhaps made the experience of caste discrimination on their return to India even more painful and agonizing.

Both these movements rejected the caste system and wanted radical changes rather than reforms, as sought by upper caste leaders like Mahatma Gandhi. Though such leaders had an understanding of the complex origins of caste and its multi-dimensional character, they gave primacy to the religious sanction it received from Hinduism. For them, caste could not be rejected without rejecting Hinduism.

However, while the Dalit leaders criticized Hinduism, they did not reject, or even seriously criticize, religion itself. Interestingly, both of those studied in this research were aware of the Marxist critique of religion and its promise of a classless secular/socialist society. While Mangoo Ram had worked with the left-wing Gaddar Party during his stay in the United States, Ambedkar had extensively read and engaged with the writings of Karl Marx. However, for both the alternative to Hinduism and caste could not be communism. Rather, it had to provide a substitute for Hinduism: an alternative religious system that could fulfil spiritual needs, provide an alternative identity and restore dignity to their people.

There is also something common in the attitudes of the two movements towards religion. At first they both appeared to be approaching religion in a purely instrumental way - they both seem to have sought an alternative religious identity that would give them an identity different from Hinduism. This was regarded as imperative for their ability to critique the logic of the caste hierarchy rather than accepting it as a natural or inevitable reality. However, they also recognized that religion is not simply a matter of acquiring a new label or joining another social/religious group. They recognized that believers also needed an alternative religious ideology, a system of rituals and beliefs that could govern their everyday lives and provide them with meaning.

Ambedkar spent the last months of his life writing a book on his notion of Buddhism, *Buddha and His Damma*. His followers have subsequently worked hard to develop their own rituals and codes for a Buddhist way of life. A lot of work has been and continues to be done by local Buddhist organizations to develop a new community elite, whose members can articulate an alternative way of life and religious ideology, as well as becoming a role model for other members of the community. Apart from running their own schools and other skill-imparting educational centres, these organizations have also arranged regular sessions to socialize adult members of the community into the Buddhist religion and culture. They recognize the crucial role that education plays in modern times in enabling younger members of the community to explore new possibilities for living a life of dignity. However, along with

building these secular resources, they have also invested in cultural consolidation, for example by investing material resources in constructing new Buddhist stupas and places of pilgrimage in different parts of Maharashtra.

Similarly, the leaders of the Ad Dharm movement were quick to realize that they would not be able to sustain the movement and provide an alternative religious identity to its members simply on the basis of a political agenda. Religion needs religious centres, a theology and a ritual system. However, unlike the Dalits in Maharashtra, the Ad Dharmis of Punjab did not build on an existing set of religious beliefs. Instead they turned to the available sources within the region - the Sikh scriptures and the writings and persona of Guru Ravidas. This meant that for Ad Dharmis there was no radical break from the past, or from a locally dominant religious tradition and its ritual system.

Sikhism and Ravidas perhaps appeared attractive to them also because of the regional context: caste in Punjab was very different from Maharashtra. The Sikh scriptures attracted them because, even though Sikhs continued to be divided on caste lines, theologically Sikhism did not support caste hierarchies and untouchability. Along with the Sikh movement, Punjab also had a long history of the presence of Islam, which also decries caste, and in pre-partition Punjab was the religion of the majority population of the province. The syncretic religious traditions of the region also allowed the 'untouchable' saints to set up their own religious centres, the Deras, and continue worshipping the holy Sikh Granth without following a particular mode or idiom of worship.

As we have discussed in Section 2, the Ad Dharm movement lost its original identity and acquired a primarily religious identity under the leadership of the Ravidasi gurus. The religious Deras became centres of Dalit identity and assertion. However, the Deras were generally non-political in character. In the absence of political mobilization, the movement lost its steam. It was only during the 1990s, with the resurgence of Dalit identity in the region, that the Deras began to acquire a political role. During the last ten years or so, as caste polarization has grown in Punjab, emphasis on the separate identity of the Ravidasis has also increased and the Ravidasi gurus have come to acquire much greater visibility than ever before.

Another important similarity between the two movements has been their quest for autonomy and distinctiveness. While Ambedkar could have converted to Islam, Christianity or Sikhism, all religions that theologically oppose caste, a choice that had been made by a large number of Dalits in the past, he chose not to do so. His choice of Buddhism was perhaps also influenced by a desire for autonomy. Buddhism no longer had a strong existing community in Maharashtra, the region where he and the members of his community were seeking an alternative to Hinduism. This enabled them to evolve their own brand of Buddhism, *Navayana* Buddhism, which is distinctive within Buddhism as a world religion.

This quest for distinctiveness and autonomy from Sikhism has also been growing among the Ravidasis of Punjab. They successfully resisted the attempts made by a section of the orthodox Sikh leadership of Punjab to bring the Ravidasi Dera at Ballan within the purview of the agency that manages the Sikh historic gurudwaras, the Shiromini Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC). More recently, this urge for distinctiveness acquired a new form when a visiting Ravidasi guru was killed in Vienna in May 2009, it is thought by 'orthodox' Sikhs. In response, the Guru Granth, the Sikh holy book, was removed from the Ravidasi Dera in Ballan and many other shrines in other parts of Punjab and outside India. Instead the shrines now only have the book containing the writings of Guru Ravidas and only his compositions are sung.

Religious processes and community conflicts are closely linked to other aspects of society, politics and the economy. As mentioned above, though the Sikh movement challenged Brahmanical practices and untouchability and advocated egalitarian values, the practice of caste and caste-based identities did not disappear from the region. Caste-based occupational differences and social and economic inequalities continued. Most of the agricultural land, for example, remained under the control of the dominant agrarian caste of Jats. In contrast, a large majority of the ex-untouchable communities, including Chamars and Ad Dharmis, were landless, working as labourers for Jat farmers in the Punjab countryside. This domination of Jats in the countryside also made them the regionally dominant community. During the post-independence period, they emerged as the most powerful group in the region, with near complete control over State-level political institutions. Over the years, they also began to control the Sikh religious institutions, at both the regional/national and the local/village levels.

However, since the 1970s, caste relations in Punjab have been changing very rapidly (see Jodhka, 2002, 2004). The commercialization of agricultural production and the growth of capitalist farming has almost completely destroyed the old bonds of patron-client relations, giving way to more formalized relations of production. Other caste-based occupations have similarly become commercialized and old associations of caste and occupation have virtually become redundant. Dalit castes also started distancing themselves from Jat farmers, seeking employment outside the village and agrarian economy. Thanks to the economic mobility experienced by some, it became possible to mobilize resources from within the community to invest in their own cultural institutions. They have built separate religious and community centres and even those who continued to live in villages are no longer tied or obliged to the dominant-caste rich farmers, enabling them to acquire a sense of autonomy vis-à-vis the dominant groups.

The role of leadership has been an important question in the literature on social movements. Not only do leaders provide direction to social movements and articulate their agenda, they also epitomize the character of the movement, its substance. Much of the classical literature on social movements of marginalized groups in India, including peasant and working class movements, suggests that they found it hard to produce leadership of their own, as a result invariably being led by middle class intellectuals.

However, in case of the two movements that we studied, leadership came from within the relevant community of ex-untouchables. Both had prominent individual leaders, who played a critical and pioneering role in shaping their respective movements - B.R. Ambedkar in the case of the neo-Buddhists and Mangoo Ram in the case of the Ad Dharmis/Ravidasis. Both were educationally accomplished and had had the option of leading a successful secular life outside India. Both had lived in Western countries and thus had been exposed to societies where untouchability was not practised. This awareness and experience of an alternative world perhaps led them to see caste inequalities and the accompanying humiliation more sharply, and motivated them to work for social change and the development of their respective communities.

Were they charismatic leaders? The answer is probably no - both individuals had to work hard to communicate their message. Although after his death, B.R. Ambedkar acquired the status of an iconic

Dalit leader almost everywhere in India, he had to work very hard, and for a long period of time, to get his message across to the Dalits of Maharashtra. Even in this region, he had to compete with Dalit members/leaders of other political formations and was not treated as the undisputed leader of the ex-untouchables during his lifetime, remaining primarily a leader of the Mahar Buddhists (see Jaffrelot, 2004). Similarly, Mangoo Ram was virtually forgotten in Punjab after the decline of Ad Dharm movement following the signing of the Poona Pact.

What was the ideological character of the two movements? It would perhaps be safe to argue that, even though there were ideological differences between them, they were both identity movements. They mobilized specific caste identities and communitarian aspirations. Both drew on existing symbols and cultural resources in order to create distinct religious communities. If one was to choose a characterization for the two movements in terms of 'old' and 'new' social movements, they would both qualify as 'new' social movements - although unlike Western new social movements, they were not movements associated with a post-industrial society, they both tried to expand notions of the normative and revolved around issues of identity (Pichardo, 1997). However, both have remained movements of a single caste group of the ex-untouchable communities – Mahars in case of the neo-Buddhists and Chamars in case of Ravidasis. Even though their criticism of caste is of a general nature and they wish to change India into a caste-less inclusive society, they have not been able to attract members of the other Dalit castes into their fold.

There are, therefore, many similarities between the two movements. However, the language and ideological resources they have employed differ. While both drew upon and re-worked symbols from the past, Ambedkar and other social reformers of the time worked hard to evolve the necessary intellectual resources on which to base an alternative 'modernist' identity for Dalits in the form of neo-Buddhism, whereas the Ravidasis of Punjab worked with what was easily available within the regional/local tradition. The neo-Buddhist movement, moreover, had to 'convert' those who had, in some sense, been practising Hindus. Given the challenge of developing a new community of believers, the Buddhist converts of Maharashtra had to develop an ideology that would appeal to the community and give them a sense of pride and confidence. This has been relatively successful, with Ambedkar's ideas in general and neo-Buddhism in particular emerging as a pan-Indian religious movement among the Dalits. Even in Punjab, we met several Dalit activists who preferred to identify themselves as

Buddhists, even though they had been influenced by the Ad Dharm movement and belonged to the caste community of Ravidasis. In contrast, and unlike Ambedkar and his followers, the Ravidasis of Punjab did not work very hard to build a religious repository of their own.

To conclude, the achievements of the two movements can be summarized. First, within their own communities of followers, both have been enormously popular. Individuals participate in activities of the movement with much enthusiasm and hope, especially when caste-related violence or conflict occurs. Every time a member of a community is attacked, almost every member of the relevant community is united in protest. Second, over the years, both have evolved as strong and autonomous communities in the regions of India where they originated. As is evident from the discussions presented in Sections 2 and 3, both communities have evolved their own structures, which facilitate and encourage the economic development of community members. Their mobilization as communities has also greatly empowered them politically in their respective regions. It is no longer easy for the traditionally dominant or 'upper castes' to practise untouchability or discriminate against them. Not only have the investments they have made in developing educational institutions and other support systems made it possible for community members to diversify into different livelihoods, move ahead economically and improve their wellbeing, their newly-developed community networks and resources have given them a sense of confidence and pride about their identity.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Prior to this, a few sociologists who studied social movements, for example Desai (1955), promoted it as a valid area for sociological/anthropological enquiry; however, it did not receive wide professional recognition.
- <sup>2</sup> This refers to the Hindu text *The Laws of Manu*, or *Manu Smriti*, in which Manu himself is seen as the primordial lawmaker.
- <sup>3</sup> Anand Teltumbde (2009) *Theorising The Dalit Movement: A Viewpoint* <http://www.ambedkar.org/research/THEORISING%20THE%20DALIT%20MOVEMENT.htm> October 16.
- <sup>4</sup> All 2001 data comes from the *Census of India: Census Data 2001* (Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner <http://censusindia.gov.in> (published and accessed on various dates).
- <sup>5</sup> *Gadar* is a Punjabi word which means revolt or unrest. The title was used by a left-wing anti-colonial movement that grew up among emigrant Indians, mostly from Punjab, living in United States and Canada during the closing years of 19th century (see Puri, 1993).
- <sup>6</sup> In 1956 the status of Scheduled Caste was extended to the Sikh Dalits but Buddhists were not allowed this status until the 1990s.
- <sup>7</sup> Personal interview in December 2008 with a leading Dalit activist in Jalandhar in Punjab.
- <sup>8</sup> The Communal Award, announced by the British Prime Minister in 1932, granted separate electorates to minority communities, including Muslims, Sikhs and Dalits. It was opposed by some (including Mahatma Gandhi) but supported by many among the minority communities, including B.R. Ambedkar.
- <sup>9</sup> Personal interview with Ravi Shankar, March 2009
- <sup>10</sup> Personal interview in Ballan, Jalandhar in December 2008.
- <sup>11</sup> Personal interview in Ballan, Jalandhar in December 2008.
- <sup>12</sup> Some of the local Dalit leaders also believe that Hindu nationalists suggested to the Chamars that Ravidas might be a suitable religious symbol. As a leading Dalit activist, L.R. Bali, told us in Jalandhar.  
*In order to make sure that untouchables did not convert to Sikhism, Islam or Christianity, the Arya Samajis propagated the symbol of Ravidas among the Chamars, Valmiki among the Chuhras and Kabir among the Meghs. That's how they made sure that Dalits stayed within the Hindu fold.* (Personal Interview January 2009).  
 While this may be true, the image of Ravidas as a Chamar had already been made available to the people of Punjab by the Sikh Gurus.
- <sup>13</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, in his pioneer work on the Ad-Dharm movement, mentions that "When he [Sant Hiran Das] established his Ravidas Sabha, in 1907, in village Hakim... several other deras including that of Sant Pipal Das, were founded soon afterward..." (Juergensmeyer, 1988, p. 87).
- <sup>14</sup> Personal Interview, January 2009.
- <sup>15</sup> Personal Interview, January 2009.
- <sup>16</sup> Personal Interview, January 2009.
- <sup>17</sup> Personal Interview, January 2009.
- <sup>18</sup> Personal Interview, January 2009.
- <sup>19</sup> As in a leaflet: *Sant Sarwan Dass Ji: A Great Visionary Sant*, published by Sant Surinder Dass Bawa (n.d.).
- <sup>20</sup> Even though Sikhism decries caste, caste-based divisions and hierarchies have continued to survive among the Sikhs in Punjab (see Jodhka, 2002, 2004; Judge and Bal, 2008; Puri, 2004).
- <sup>21</sup> The total number of Punjabis in the United Kingdom is roughly half a million [http://indiandiaspora.nic.in/diaspora\\_pdf/chapter10.pdf](http://indiandiaspora.nic.in/diaspora_pdf/chapter10.pdf), April 10, 2009

- 22 Personal interview in Jalandhar, October 2008.
- 23 Personal interview with an activist disciple at Dera Ballan, December 2008.
- 24 Personal interview, December 2008.
- 25 Personal interview, January 2009.
- 26 Personal interview, September 2007.
- 27 Personal interview with a veteran Dalit leader in Jalandhar in September 2008.
- 28 It is interesting to also look at the figures for the areas that constituted Maharashtra 30 years later. By 1961, the Mahars, including the Bauddhas, constituted 9 per cent, Mangs 1.8 per cent and Chambars 1.3 per cent of the total population of Maharashtra (see Patwardhan, 1968, p. 303).
- 29 3.9 per cent Brahmins, 1.69 per cent Vaishyas and 1 per cent Kshatriyas.
- 30 'Jethe gaon tethe Maharwada' (where there is a village there is a settlement of Mahars) is a popular saying in Maharashtra.
- 31 Focus Group Discussion, Solapur, March 2009.
- 32 The Peel Commission was not appointed to examine the role of caste, but it soon understood that the caste structure of Indian society was a central problem.
- 33 The ruling dynasty of Baroda (the Gayekwars) was itself of low caste Marathas and had already established schools for untouchables and supported the studies of promising young low caste men (see Jaffrelot, 2004, p. 27).
- 34 Ambedkar had already started a weekly, *Mooknayak* (Dumb Leader), in the early 1920s. In the later phase of his life he also started *Prabuddha Bharat* (Buddhist India) and *Janta* (The People).
- 35 As argued in Ambedkar's book *The Untouchables: Who They Were and Why They Became Untouchables*, first published in 1948.
- 36 Personal interview, Solapur, March 2009.
- 37 In our field trip to Solapur, we had the opportunity to attend a retirement 'felicitation' ceremony of a Buddhist Branch Manager of a Bank. The function started with garlanding the statues of Buddha and Ambedkar and offering flowers on the book *Buddha and His Dhamma*. However, the rites were not performed by a bhikkhu. Instead, a trustworthy man, respected by all, recited the Buddhist prayers and everybody present at the gathering followed him. This was followed by presentation of bouquets to the host and a vegetarian dinner, without alcohol.
- 38 Interview with Pandarinath Raju Bansode, Solapur, March 14, 2009. Similar sentiments were expressed and examples given by many other interviewees during the FGDs in Pune and Mumbai.
- 39 Interview with Anukampa Waghmore, Solapur, March 15, 2009.
- 40 Personal interview, Mumbai, March 2009.
- 41 The function was held on 20th May 2007. On this day, Laxamanan Mane, a famous Marathi poet from the Dhanagar community, along with several of his followers, publicly accepted Buddhism (see Mahajan and Jodhka, 2009).
- 42 Personal interview with the national secretary of the BSI, Mumbai, March 2009.
- 43 Personal interview, Mumbai, March 2009.
- 44 Personal interview, Mumbai, April 2009.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Personal interview, Mumbai, March 2009.
- 47 Personal interview, Mumbai, March 2009.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Personal interview, Pune, March 2009.
- 50 Personal interview, Pune, March 2009.

- <sup>51</sup> Though we could not visit all these groups, we managed to talk to some. One such institution was the Mahamahind International Dhammadoot Society, which is a member of the World Buddhist Sangha Council, is headed by a Sri Lankan Buddhist Ven, Dr. N. Anand Mahathero, and is situated on the campus of Takshshila School in Ulhasnagar, Thane district (discussed below). This society also trains people to become Bauddha Bhikkhus to spread the message of the Buddha among the masses (details mentioned elsewhere). Another organization, the Babasaheb Ambedkar Pratisthan, used to check whether people were actually following Buddhist rituals by organizing a competition called Sabse Sundar Ghar (the best decorated house). During the competition, the houses of followers were visited in order to verify the way in which people were practising their religion. It was reported that during one such effort in Urli Kanchan village, 28 kms from Pune, visitors found that nearly half the 26 houses visited still had Hindu gods, although the rest were practising only Buddhist rituals.
- <sup>52</sup> Personal interview, Mumbai, April 2009.
- <sup>53</sup> All the information about this college is based on a personal interview with the Principal in Pune, March 2009.
- <sup>54</sup> Personal interview, Ulhasnagar, March 2009.
- <sup>55</sup> Personal interview, Ulhasnagar, March 2009.
- <sup>56</sup> For details see Mahajan and Jodhka, 2009.
- <sup>57</sup> The idea of the Republican Party of India (RPI) was conceived by Ambedkar, but it was formally established a year after his death in October 1957. However, in later years the RPI suffered severe internal strife and was divided into several groups.
- <sup>58</sup> Personal interview, Solapur, March 14, 2009.
- <sup>59</sup> Personal interview, Pune, March 2009.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid. The names are: N. K Jagtap, P. B. Pole, S T Gayekwad, Vilas Vagh, A K Bhalerao, A. N. Gayekwad, S. N Kamble, B. Sarode, S. Kavade, M.S. More, M.B. Vaghmare, U.H Selar, Nirmala Vanshiv, S.S. Nagnoor and M. Kamble.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>62</sup> Mentioned in a leaflet provided along with the Annual Report.
- <sup>63</sup> The Annual Report of the bank, provided at the head office of the Siddhartha Sahkari bank.
- <sup>64</sup> This interview was undertaken in 2007, when we were working on an earlier research project (see Mahajan and Jodhka, 2009).
- <sup>65</sup> Personal interview, Mumbai, April 1, 2009.
- <sup>66</sup> All the information on this organization is based on our FGD in Solapur, March 2009. Some of the information was also gathered from our stay in Pune, as we were able to meet the Chief Editor of the newspaper Bahujan Maharashtra, which is run by Bahujan Hitay Sangh.
- <sup>67</sup> Sushant Kamble, Deputy Collector, Solapur was the Chairman of Solapur Branch; Deepak Wagade (Revenue Officer) and Suryakant Tarkade (another officer) were members of its governing body.
- <sup>68</sup> Solapur has a large Buddhist population and most of it was dependent on the mills for employment. However, after the mills closed, people were left with the option of becoming a wage labourer or migrating to another city, such as Pune or Mumbai, in a search for a new livelihood.
- <sup>69</sup> Based on our FGD in Solapur, March 2009.

<sup>70</sup> Several distinct parties claim the name of RPI. Splinter-groups include:

- Republican Party of India (Athvale) of Ramdas Athvale
- Republican Party of India (Gavai) of R.S. Gavai and Rajendra Gavai
- Bhartiya Republican Party (Bharip) Bahujan Mahasangha of Prakash Ambedkar
- Peoples Republican Party of Prof. Jogendra Kawade
- Republican Party Of India (Democratic) of T.M. Kamble
- Republican Party of India (B.C. Kamble) of B.C. Kamble
- Republican Party Of India (Khobragade) of B.D. Khobragade
- Republican Party Of India (Mogha) of Shivram Mogha
- Republican Party Of India (Talwatkar) of Ghanshyam Talwatkar
- Republican Party of India (Sivaraj)
- Republican Party of India (Raja Dhale)
- Indian Republican Party (Dalit Panther) of Namdeo Dhasal

<sup>71</sup> Personal interview, Solapur, March 2009.

<sup>72</sup> Personal interview, Pune, March 18, 2009.

<sup>73</sup> This was also the time when the caste system became solidified and codified in a particular way (see, for instance, Dirks, 2001).

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## Appendix 1

### List of interviews

List of the interviews conducted in Punjab				
	Name	Role/designation	Place	Date
1	Mr. Gian Singh Bal		Jalandhar city	Sep 08
2	Mr. Deshraj Kali	Journalist in a popular news daily	Jalandhar city	Sep 08
3	Mr. S.R. Bali	Chairman, Ambedkar Trust and All India Samta Sainik Dal, Punjab	Jalandhar city	Sep 08
4	Mr. C.L. Chumber	An active ideologue of Ad-Dharm Movement	Jalandhar city	Sep 08
5	Mr. Manohar Lal Mahey (interviewed three times)	Business man at Buta Mandi. Actively engaged with the SGRSSS	Buta Mandi and Jalandhar city	Sep 08, Nov 08 and January 09
6	Mr. S. L. Virdhi	A lawyer and independent writer on the issue dalit's right	Phagwara	Sep 08
7	Sant Surinder Das	Junior saint at Dera Sach Khand Bal	Dera Ballan	Sep 08, Nov 08 and January 09
8	S. R. Heer (interviewed three times)	Secretary, Sri Guru Ravidas Janm Sthan Public Charitable Trust and Sant Swaran Das Charitable Hospital Trust and Sant Sarwan Das Public School Trust	Dera Ballan, Jalandhar City and Kathar	Sep 08, Nov 08 and January 09
9	Sant Niranjn Dass	The religious head of the Dera Sach Khand Bal	Dera Ballan	Sep 08, Nov 08 and January 09
10	Mr. S.L. Sangar	Member, Ambedkar Trust	Jalandhar city	Sep 08
11	Mr. R.L. Jassi	Ayurvedic Doctor. His son is an MBBS who runs a Guru Ravidas Mission Hospital at Phagwara	Jalandhar city	Sep 08
12	Mr. Surinder Choudhary	Businessman	Jalandhar city	Sep 08
13	Mr. Jaswinder Singh Kambra	President of the Sain Jagriti Mission, Kabirpanthi	Jalandhar city	Sep 08
14	Mr. Resham Singh	Has set up Dr. Ambedkar Youth Club in Patiyala	Dera Baba Jode, Raipur, Rasulpur	Nov 08
15	FGD with Pyarelal Krishna Lal and Satpal	A businessman at Boota Mandi, his son and his staff	Buta Mandi	Nov 08
16	Seth Satpal Mal	Prsident, Sri Guru Ravidas Educational and Charitable Trust, Buta Mandi, Jalandhar. A businessman in leather and a follower of Dera Ballan	Buta Mandi	Nov 08

<b>List of the interviews conducted in Punjab</b>				
	<b>Name</b>	<b>Role/designation</b>	<b>Place</b>	<b>Date</b>
17	FGD with Mr. Navin Kamal Mahay, Ram Lal Mahay and Daya Ram Jassi	General Secretary; Patron; and Member Satguru Ravidas Dham Management Committee, Buta Mandi;	Buta Mandi	Nov 08
18	Gurbaksha Singh	Manager, Sant Pritam Dass Ji Memmorial Charitable Eye Hospital	Dera Baba Jode, Raipur-Rasulpur	Nov 08
19	Kamaljeet	A sevadaar of Dera Sant Pritam Dass	Dera Baba Jode, Raipur-Rusulpur	Nov 08
20	R. S. Bhatthi	Gen. Sec. Sant Pritam Dass Ji Memmorial Charitable Eye Hospital	Dera Baba Jode, Raipur-Rasulpur	Nov 08
21	Hans Raj	Chief Accountant, Sant Pritam Dass Ji Memmorial Charitable Eye Hospital	Dera Baba Jode, Raipur-Rasulpur	Nov 08
22	Ramkishan	A Ravidasi labourer working at Manohar Mahay's house	Jalandhar city	Nov 08
23	Sant Nirmal Dass	Head of the Dera Sant Pritam Dass. He is also the chairman of Sant Pritam Dass Ji Memmorial Charitable Eye Hospital	Dera Baba Jode, Raipur-Rasulpur	Nov 08
24	Sant Nirmal Singh	Head of Dera Avadhan. He is also the Gen. Sec. of Sri Guru Ravidas Sadhu Sampraday Society	Dera Kalasanga Road, Jalandhar	Nov 08
25	Mr. Joy Verghese	Principle, Sant Sarwn Dass Model School	Phagwara	Jan 09
26	Santokh Ram	A sewadaar working at Sant Sarwan Dass Model School	Phagwara	Jan 09
27	Seth Brij Lal	A devotee of Dera Ballan who donated the land for Sant Sarwan Dass Model School, settled in Birmingham	Phagwara	Jan 09
28	FGD with Charna Ram Ahir and Niranjan Dass	Principal and Teacher, Sri Guru Ravidas School	Churowali	Jan 09
29	Ravi Shankar	A student of BA who does Kirtan with Sant Ramanand at Dera Ballan	Dera Ballan,	Jan 09
30	Karamchand	a Sweadaar who has been living in the Dera since his childhood days	Dera Ballan	Jan 09
31	Jaspal	A sewadaar from Village Samastapur,	Dera Ballan	Jan 09
32	Durga Dass	A sewadaar from Village Daulatpur, does farming for the Dera	Dera Ballan	Jan 09

**List of the interviews conducted in Punjab**

	<b>Name</b>	<b>Role/designation</b>	<b>Place</b>	<b>Date</b>
33	Raju	A sewadaar from Village Patra, dist Patiyala	Dera Ballan	Jan 09
34	FGD with Pyare Lal, her wife Mrs Balwant Kaur (Phagwara) and G R Virdi and her wife Mrs Surjeet Virdhi (Delhi)	Consultant, World Bank and businessman respectively	Dera Ballan	Jan 09
35	Rajneesh Kumar	Devotee of Dera Ballan and Teacher, central School, Pathankot	Dera Ballan	Jan 09
36	Sita Ram	A sewadaar from Village Lesriwalan, settled in Dubai, a worker	Dera Ballan	Jan 09
37	Yogendra	A Non-Ravidasi visitor from Village Samastapur	Dera Ballan	Jan 09
38	Sri Ram Pyara	A sewadaar from Village Samastapur, was a carpenter but does not work now	Dera Ballan	Jan 09
39	Sarwan and his wife	A devotee from village Kudiana, dist Hoshiyarpur	Dera Ballan	Jan 09
40	Omkar	BA Final Yr Student In Dist. Hoshiyarpur	Dera Ballan	Jan 09
41	FGD with Nisha Pal+ Monider Pal (Two sisters)	Devotes and students of Punjabi University Patiyala	Dera Ballan	Jan 09
42	Ratan	A Sewadaar from village Sangatpur, Phagwara, farmer	Dera Ballan	Jan 09
43	Devraj	A devotee settled in Dubai, carpenter	Dera Ballan	Jan 09
44	Resham Lal	A Devotee From Patra Village,	Dera Ballan	Jan 09
45	Bijay Kumar Hazara	A devotee and writer	Dera Ballan	Jan 09
46	Bedi Ram	An old man in his 80s. he used to serve Sant Sarwan Dass.	Dera Ballan	Jan 09
47	Tarsem Lal	A sewadaar from village Santokhpura	Dera Ballan	Jan 09
48	Harbilas Lal	A devotee from village Jagrawa, he was the lambardar (mukhia) of the village	Dera Ballan	Jan 09

<b>List of the interviews conducted in Maharashtra</b>				
	<b>Name</b>	<b>Role/designation</b>	<b>Place</b>	<b>Date</b>
1	Rahul Bodhi		Tilak Nagar, Mumbai	29-03-09
2	Anuradha Rokde	Coordinator, Dhamma Sunday School, Sarvodaya Buddha Vihar	Tilak Nagar, Mumbai	29-03-09
3	FGD with Sirish Sitasawad and S.D. Waghmare	Potential informant, working in Salex Tax Officer, Solapur; Sales Tax Officer, Usmanabad	Teachers colony, Solapur	10-03-09
4	FGD with Dr K. Handore, Mr. V.D Gaikwad, Mr B S Tanhalikar, Dr M D Shinde, Dr Sah ji Gayekwad, Prof D S Kamble	Medical officer, Solapur; Administrative officer, St Joesph Hospital, Mumbai; Officer, NHSO, Gol, Solapur; Head of the Dept. Hindi, Valchand College, Solapur; Medical officer, MC Solapur, Secretary, Dr. Babasaheb hospital Trust, Solapur	Solapur	12-03-09
5	Bhimabai Laxmansiddh Ganesh (F)	An old lady who converted to Buddhism in 1956 in Nagpur	Solapur	10-03-09
6	Bhagwan Bhivaji Bhalerao	An old man who was active in the movement in 1970s	Solapur	13-03-09
7	Vishakha Kale (F)	Social Activist, Primary School Teacher, President: Kranti Jyoti Savitri Ramai Backward Classes Mahila Pratisthan	Solapur	13-03-09
8	V N Gaikwad	Retired Bank Manger, Dena Bank, Solapur	Solapur, at his residence	13-03-09
9	FGD with Pandarinath Raju Bansode and her wife Mrs Asha Bhansode	Owner of two petrol pumps in Solapur	Solapur, at his residence	14-03-09
10	FGD with Uttam Rao Nikaje and the Principle of the School	Member Secretary of Dr. Ambedkar Memmorial High School	Solapur	15-03-09
11	FGD with Dhammachari Singraja and Anukampa Waghe	Members, TBMSG	Solapur	15-03-09
12	Pandit Shivapav Waghmore	Member, BSI	Solapur	16-03-09
13	Boddhacharya Baba Saheb Kshirsagar	District President, BSI	Solapur	16-03-09

**List of the interviews conducted in Maharashtra**

	<b>Name</b>	<b>Role/designation</b>	<b>Place</b>	<b>Date</b>
14	Rajabhau Sarvode	Ex. MLA RPI(A)	Solapur	14-03-09
15	Vilas Vagh	Chairman: Siddhartha Sahkari Bank, Publisher: Sugava Prakashan, Chief editor: Bahujan Maharashtra	Pune	18-03-09
16	Nazam S.R. (Non-Buddhist)	Principal, Dr Ambedkar College of Arts and Commerce	Pune	19-03-09
17	Ashok Tangade	Secretary, Campaign for Human Rights	Pune	19-03-09
18	Informal talk with many people	Members, Samta Sainik Dal and other Buddhists	Mahad	20-03-09
19	Dhammachari Kumarjeev	Dhammachari, TBMSG	Pune	21-03-09
20	Dhammmacharini Vishakha (F)	Dhammmacharini, TBMSG; also lecturer Dr Ambedkar College of Arts and Commerce and wife of Lokmitra (who played an important role in the establishment of TBMSG in India)	Pune	22-03-09
21	Avinash Namdeo Jagtap	Entrepreneur, owner of a cement factory	Pune	22-03-09
22	FGD with Namdeo Jagtap and his family	Entrepreneur, owner of three cement factories	Pune	23-03-09
23	Madhuri (F)	Activist, TBMSG who works on atrocity's cases	Pune	23-03-09
24	Maitreyinath	Member, TBMSG	Pune	24-03-09
25	Prashant Niswade	Student, living in the hostel run by TBMSG	Pune	24-03-09
26	FGD with girls in the Hostel	Students, living in the girls hostel run by TBMSG	Pune	25-03-09
27	A visit to Dapodi	TBMSG Buddha Vihar	Pune	26-03-09
28	Baban Pawar	Secretary, Sanghmitra Buddha Vihar	Ambedkar Nagar, Bombay	30-03-09
29	FGD with Bhadant A N Mahathero, Bhante Mahindvansha, Y. Z. Khare and P S Pradhan	A Srilankan Buddhist who has got the Indian citizenship, Bhanteji, chief accountant and the Pali Teacher of Taxsila School	Ulhasnagar, Thane	28-03-09
30	Arun Kamble	Phule Ambedkar Chair, Bombay University and Ex. President Dalit Panther and Ex. Gen Sec Janta Dal	Bombay University	31-03-09

**List of the interviews conducted in Maharashtra**

	<b>Name</b>	<b>Role/designation</b>	<b>Place</b>	<b>Date</b>
31	FGD with Sanjay Tulsiram Vaira and Sangeeta Pawar	Social activist; Lecturer, Dept of Commerce, Bombay University	Bombay University	31-03-09
32	Srikant Talwatkar	Librarian, Dr Ambedkar College of Arts, Commerce and Science	Bombay	01-04-09
33	Dr V K Jhalani	Principle, Dr Ambedkar College of Arts, Commerce and Science	Bombay	01-04-09
34	Jagdish Gawai	National Secretary, BSI	Mumbai	30-03-09
35	A S Gajabiye	Chairman, Rajdeep Cooperatice Society	Mumbai	02-04-09
36	FGD with Dable Gorkar, S K Jamgade, M C Dhoke	Members, Nagarjun Cooperative society	Mumbai	02-04-09
37	Vaidehi Ahire	Accountant, Vrittaratna Samrat newspaper	Mumbai	1-04-09
38	FGD with V N Gaikwad, Mr Renabaru, S R Sonawne and Nages Talbhandare	Retired BM, Dena Bank; retired staff Cooperative Bank, retired staff Cooperative Bank and member BAMSEF	Solapur	16-03-09
39	Dr M D Shinde	Head of the Dept. Hindi, Valchand College, Solapur	Solapur	14-03-09

## Appendix 2

### People's Education Society educational institutions established between 1956 and 2009

1. Siddhartha College of Mass Communication, Bombay
2. Siddhartha Institute of Industry and Administration, Bombay.
3. Dr. Ambedkar College of Commerce and Economics, Wadala, Bombay
4. Dr. Ambedkar College of Law, Wadala, Bombay
5. Siddhartha English School, Wadala, Bombay
6. Siddhartha Vihar Hostel, Wadala, Bombay
7. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Public, New Bombay
8. PES's Jr College of Education, New Bombay
9. PES's Marathi Medium Secondary School and Jr. College, New Bombay
10. PES's Marathi Medium Primary School
11. Milind College of Science, Aurangabad
12. Dr. Ambedkar College of Arts and Commerce, Aurangabad
13. Hostel for Working Women, Aurangabad
14. Dr. Ambedkar College of Law, Aurangabad
15. Dr. Ambedkar College of Engineering, Aurangabad
16. College of Physical Education, Aurangabad
17. Matosri Ramabai Ambedkar High School, Aurangabad
18. College Girls Hostel, Aurangabad
19. Milind Primary School, Aurangabad
20. Dr. Ambedkar College of Arts, Science and Science (residential), Mahad
21. Subedar Sawadkar Vidyarthi Ashram (Students' Hostel), Mahad
22. Dr. Ambedkar College of Arts and Commerce, Pune
23. PES's Pre-primary, Primary and Secondary School, Pune
24. Nagsen Vidyalaya (school) and Jr. College, Nanded
25. Nagsen Primary School, Nanded
26. Gautam Vidyalaya, Pandharpur
27. Nagsen Vidyalaya, Bangalore
28. Research Centre for Comparative Religion, Bangalore

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- 19 Tomalin, E. *Hinduism and International Development: Religions and Development Background Paper* 2009
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