



## Religions and Development Research Programme

# Religious mobilizations for development and social change: Dalit movements in Punjab and Maharashtra, India

Movements for social change often arise in response to the deprivation and poverty experienced by socially excluded groups. However, lasting change is only likely if such movements succeed in forging alliances between many groups and organizations, mobilizing wide support and adopting clever political strategies. Sometimes religious groups are in the forefront, but more often they are perceived as being resistant to progressive social change. Casting religion as a facilitator of, or obstacle to, change is clearly over-simplified. To develop a more nuanced understanding of the role of religion and religious organizations in movements for social change and the ways in which such movements engage with religion, studies of two movements of disadvantaged groups in India were undertaken.

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 Dharam/Ravidasi movement among the Chamars of the Doaba sub-region of Punjab, and the neo-Buddhist movement among the Hindu Mahars of Maharashtra.

### Background

The institution of caste shapes the opportunities available to people throughout India, although there are many regional variations. For the Hindu majority, caste is an important aspect of their cultural and religious lives,

shaping ideas about differences and divisions in society. The ideas of 'purity' and 'impurity' with which it is associated produced a rigid hierarchical social order marked by inequality and the humiliating practice of treating some groups regarded as outside the caste system as 'untouchables'. Caste-based culture privileged some social groups and resulted in poverty and deprivation for others.

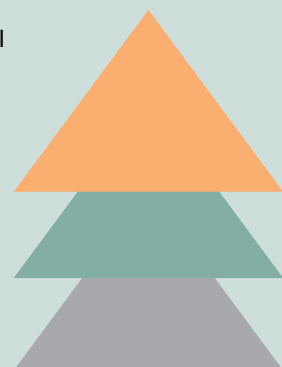
Although the legitimacy of the caste hierarchy was questioned by religious movements centuries ago, it has been seriously challenged only during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Anti-caste movements have invariably taken a religious form, while also seeking to address questions of development and social change. Their explicit objective is to empower and uplift historically excluded and marginalized sections of the Hindu population – Dalits (ex-untouchables or Scheduled Castes).

The Chamars and Mahars were both politically and socially excluded and economically disadvantaged. Both criticized the Hindu religion for supporting the practice of untouchability and the caste hierarchy, to which they attributed their poverty and exclusion. They could have mobilized and tried to secure improvements in their political and economic position by pressing the government for improved opportunities but, rather than opting for a purely secular approach, both movements assumed a religious character. However, neither pressed for reform within Hinduism, instead adopting a different

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Some implications of the experience of the Ravidasi and neo-Buddhist movements for progressive social change for other Dalit caste groups within Hinduism are:

- Political influence and legal/policy change are necessary but not sufficient to overcome engrained 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.
- Leadership is important, but investment in spiritual and material religious resources is also needed to secure allegiance to a 'new' religious tradition.
- Investment in social facilities, especially education, helps to improve a community's wellbeing.



religious strategy: seeking inspiration in an alternative version of the religious tradition in the case of the Chamars, converting to another religion in the case of the Mahars. Both were quite successful in mobilizing support for their struggle and achieving improvements in their socio-economic wellbeing.

The reasons why they adopted these strategies and their outcomes in terms of dignity, empowerment and increased prosperity were the subject of this research.

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. In addition, during the fieldwork period between September 2008 and April 2009, some of the health, education and other development-related facilities established by the communities were visited.

The study examined

- the wider social, political and religious contexts in which the two movements originated
- how and why they gave prominence to a religious idiom in their political struggles for equal rights
- the identity of the movements' leaders and their credentials as religious figureheads
- the characteristics of participants in the struggles
- their ideological motivations, strategies and alliances, including the use made of religion, and how these changed over time
- the outcomes of movements based on religious mobilization with respect to the economic, political and social position of the groups involved.

## The movements

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 1920s, the Punjabi Chamars asked the colonial government to record them in the forthcoming population census as a religious group separate from Hindus, Ad Dharmis. Subsequently, they gradually 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.

Brief accounts of the origins and characteristics of the two movements are given in Boxes 1 and 2.

## Box 1: The Ravidasi movement of the Chamars of Punjab

The Chamars are traditionally a leather working occupational group, who benefited from opportunities to equip the British colonial army. The son of an enterprising leather trader, Mangoo Ram acquired an education locally and then migrated to California for work in the 1920s. On his return, he mobilized his community to petition the colonial government to be categorized as Ad Dharmis (literally ancient religion), a religious community distinct from Hinduism, within which they were treated as outcastes. Although identified as such in the 1931 census, when the list of Scheduled (disadvantaged) Castes was drawn up in 1935, it contained only Hindu castes. The Ad Dharmis (533,129 or 15 per cent of Scheduled Caste members in Punjab in 2001) stood to lose the benefits to be made available to Scheduled Castes if they insisted on being identified as non-Hindus.

Instead, in a quest for an alternative religious identity, they looked to the Sikh religion as an alternative source of a religious and ritual life, finding this in the writings of a fifteenth century Chamar saint, Guru Ravidas, in the Sikh holy book, the Guru Granth, and Ravidasi *deras* (sacred places) that were run by religious leaders from their own caste. Building on their emerging sense of community as Ad Dharmis, since the 1930s, the Chamars have evolved an autonomous religious identity as Ravidasis, even when officially listed as Hindus (or sometimes Sikhs).

Prosperous Chamars, particularly those living in the West, have generously donated to existing and new *deras* associated with Ravidas, especially the most important one in Ballan, near Jalandhar. The importance and opulence of this *dera*, which has also functioned as a centre of political activity, linking Ravidasis into the wider movement for Dalit rights, reinforces their sense of identity and dignity. The founding of an important temple in Banaras, the birthplace of Guru Ravidasi, in the 1960s, and the annual pilgrimage to it by Ravidasis from Punjab, provide another focus for the geographically dispersed community, helping to increase its national and international profile.

As well as using donations for temples, the Ravidasi Gurus have established schools and hospitals. They have consistently urged their followers to educate their children and provide them with good health care, contributing to the increased prosperity of many Chamars. Although used mainly by Chamars, the facilities are open to all.

## Box 2: Mahar Dalits in Maharashtra and conversion to Buddhism

Recruitment of Mahars into the colonial army enabled them to move out of villages, with their caste-based socio-economic order, enter new areas of employment and ensure that their children obtained a secular (non-caste based) education. Some, including B.R. Ambedkar, born into a Mahar military family, went on to study overseas. However, their economic and educational achievements did not bring acceptance in Hindu society – they were still treated as untouchables, prohibited from entering Hindu temples or drinking water from public sources. Even when he was employed by the local ruler of Baroda, B.R. Ambedkar was unable to rent a decent house in the town because of his caste. Subsequently, qualified as an economist and lawyer, his legal career in Bombay in the 1920s was hindered by his caste status.

Ambedkar attributed his disadvantage and humiliation to Hinduism and started to look for ways of forging an alternative identity for his community, that would give them confidence and self-respect; campaign politically for Dalit political representation; work within government (as a minister in Nehru's government and Chairman of the Constituent Assembly of India); and reform Hinduism and the caste system. Eventually, concluding that Hinduism could not be reformed, he began to urge members of his community to convert to Buddhism – an undogmatic religion 'native' to India. Twenty years after reaching this conclusion, in 1955, he and a large number of Mahars, the largest Scheduled Caste in Maharashtra, publicly announced their conversion.

Subsequently almost the entire community has become Buddhist. While in 1951, there were only 2,487 Buddhists in Maharashtra, by 1961 there were 2.79 million (80 per cent of Mahars) and by 2001, 5.84 million – 6.1 per cent of the Maharashtra population and nearly three quarters of all Buddhists in India. Almost all were converts to an Ambedkarite version of Buddhism, also called neo-Buddhism.

Conversion did not transform their lives overnight, but their new religious identity increased their self-confidence and empowered them politically. It significantly raised their awareness of the value of education, and produced motivated leaders who have worked for social and economic development of community members. Through a network of faith and community based organizations, they are running a large number of schools, cooperative banks and other institutions. Although many Hindu religious practices persist amongst neo-Buddhists and many of them remain poor, conversion to Buddhism has been a positive political strategy that has liberated converts from the caste hierarchy. B.R. Ambedkar, who died in 1956, has iconic status and is a role model for Dalits throughout India.



Mukti kon Pathe Prasaar Abhiyaan: Campaign for the Path to Liberation, 82<sup>nd</sup> celebration of the Mahad Satyagrah, 20<sup>th</sup> March 2009, Mahad, Maharashtra (photo: Avinash Kumar)

## Commonalities and contrasts

The research demonstrates that both the Ravidasi and neo-Buddhist conversion 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 well 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.
- sought equal rights, access to material resources and improved prosperity, while using the idiom of identity and culture because in the caste system, poverty and inequality are not merely economic conditions but are accompanied by de-humanization and indignity
- 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.
- built on existing symbolic and cultural resources by investing 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.

## Conclusion

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



Images of the Buddha and J.R. Ambedkar at Manuski, a Buddhist organisation in Pune (photo: Avinash Kumar)



Religious celebration at Dera Sachkand Ballan, Jalandhar, Punjab (photo: Dera Sachkand Ballan Photo Library, with permission)

both transcendental/ spiritual significance for its adherents and symbolic value as a source of a dignified social identity.

## Implications for other movements

Some implications for other movements for progressive social change for ex-untouchable caste groups within Hinduism can be identified from these case studies in Punjab and Maharashtra:

- 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.



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### Further information

Jodhka, Surinder S. and Kumar, A. (2010) *Religious Mobilizations for Development and Social Change: A Comparative Study of Dalit Movements in Punjab and Maharashtra, India*, Birmingham: Religions and Development Research Programme Working Paper 47.

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