Policy Brief

Religious Mobilizations for Development and Change:
A Study of Two Social Movements of Ex-Untouchables in India

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Caste has for long been an important aspect of India's social order. Notwithstanding significant variations across regions, the institution of caste has shaped structures of opportunity and access in the subcontinent. For the majority population of the Hindus it has also been an important aspect of their cultural and religious life and shaped the notion of differences and divisions in society. However, caste was not simply a question of cultural difference. The ideas of "pure" and "impure" produced a hierarchical social order, marked by rigid social inequalities and the humiliating practice of treating some groups as "untouchables". Caste based cultures privileged some social groups and produced deprivations and poverty among others.

Though the legitimacy of caste hierarchy was questioned by religious movements during the "medieval" times, it was during the colonial and post-colonial period that the caste system began to be attacked politically and more systematically. Interestingly, the anti-caste movements have invariably taken a religious form. However, while these movements have a religious format they engage with "secular" questions of development and social change much more directly. Their explicit object is the empowerment and uplift of the historically excluded and marginalized sections of the Indian/ Hindu population.

Based on qualitative fieldwork, the paper looks at two important religious movements of the Dalits (the ex-untouchables or the Scheduled Castes), in two different regions/States of India. These are 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 explores their quest for dignified social existence and the struggle for material development and empowerment through religious mobilizations.

Thanks to their religious movements, the two caste groups have evolved as strong and autonomous communities in their respective regions. The movements helped produce a set of motivated leaders who have worked hard for social and economic development of their community members. Along with building autonomous symbolic or cultural resources for their fellow Dalits, such as ritual practices and sacred places, they have also invested in laying down structures for social and economic development of their community. Though a network of community-based organizations, the Ravi Dasis and Neo-Buddhists today run a large number of schools, cooperative banks and other support institutions for community members. The movements also significantly raised their awareness about the value of education. The newly developed community networks and resources give them a sense of confidence and pride about their identity. The investments

they have made in developing educational institutions and other supporting systems makes it easier for them to move ahead economically and diversify into different activities for livelihood and well-being.

Their mobilization as communities has also empowered them politically in their respective regions. It is no longer easy for the traditionally dominant or "upper castes" to practice untouchability and discrimination against them in the pockets where these movements are powerful. B.R. Ambedkar, the pioneering leader of one of these movements, has also emerged as an important political and cultural icon for Dalits communities across the country.

The socially excluded and marginalized groups struggle not only for equity and entitlements but also for cultural and symbolic resources, of which religion is an important part. Even when they mobilize against dominant religious ideologies, such as the ex-untouchables questioning the practice of caste and untouchability in Hinduism, they do not reject religion *per se*. It remains an important component of their notion of well-being. Thus, instead of turning to 'secular modernity' or 'moving out of religion', they mobilize their communities for autonomous religious identities which offer them a dignified mode of self-representation and a way out of, what they view as, a degrading and humiliating status within the dominant religious tradition.