



Religions and Development Research Programme

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

Surinder S. Jodhka and Avinash Kumar

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 and at the same time developing cultural and religious systems that would give coherence and legitimacy to the movements which coalesced around their struggles to escape the caste system.

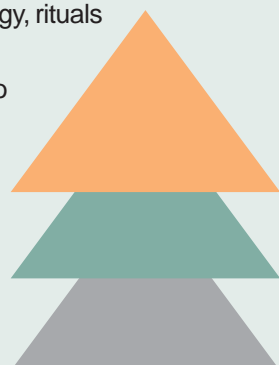
- In the 1940s, the Punjabi Chamars gravitated towards the teachings, gurus and places of worship (*deras*) associated with 15th century Guru Ravidas, himself a Chamar, whose writings had been included in the Sikh Holy book, *Adi Granth*.
- In the 1950s, the Maharashtra Mahars, under the leadership of 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 also 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 serves multiple functions, including improved access to education, employment opportunities and healthcare.

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.

<http://www.rad.bham.ac.uk/index.php?section=47>

