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Living as a ‘Minority’: A case of Buddhist-Dalits in contemporary Uttar Pradesh

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In this paper, I will deal with ‘converted-Buddhists’, Buddhist-Dalits, in western Uttar Pradesh, focusing on their religious-ritual practices and narratives. In previous studies, scholars have studied whether Buddhist-Dalits can distance themselves from Hindu beliefs and practices and, if so, the extent of their separation. This perspective is based on the idea of ‘discontinuity’. However, I would like to consider conversion not from the viewpoint of ‘discontinuity’ but from that of ‘continuity’. On the one hand, Buddhist-Dalits ideologically adopt Buddhist practices; on the other hand, they selectively or syncretistically continue to follow certain Hindu traditions. This is because Buddhist-Dalits need to negotiate with Hindu relatives in determining their status and position in society.

1. Introduction

It is often said that the 'caste system' is tightly linked to Indian society and the life-world of Indians. Dalits (also known as 'untouchables') have been politically, economically, socially, culturally, and religiously excluded from the mainstream in India because the caste system has historically placed them on the bottom rung of society. In other words, they have been treated as 'the outsiders within' Hindu society. Over the years, there have been many Untouchable liberation movements/Dalit movements, especially since Independence, that have sought to ensure the politico-economic rights, social security, and cultural and religious autonomy of this oppressed group. As a result of these struggles, the political, economic, and social condition of the Dalits has gradually improved; for example, untouchability has been abolished, and the reservation system has been established. It is ironic, however, that the struggle of the Dalits to express and assert themselves have also essentialised and excluded them from mainstream society by presenting them as a 'minority'.

One of these struggles is their conversion to Buddhism, which Dr Ambedkar proposed and which I will deal with in this paper. Since 1956, Dalits have been converting to Buddhism to liberate or exclude themselves from the 'unequal Hindu society' and join or include themselves in the 'equal Buddhist society'. The adoption of Buddhism means, however, that they must live as Buddhist-Dalits among relatives who are mostly Hindus, that is, they must live as 'a minority within a minority'.

In this paper, I will focus on 'converted-Buddhists' ('Neo-Buddhists'), Buddhist-Dalits, in western Uttar Pradesh¹, where they are a small minority and where most of their relatives are Hindus. In this situation, how do they live and negotiate with their relatives? Considering the assertions and the lifeworlds of the Buddhist-Dalits, I will analyse their narratives and their religious and ritual practices.

2. Theoretical Points

There are several theoretical frameworks for analysing Indian social movements. As mentioned in the introductory note of this special issue, one is the 'dual politics' theory of Ray and Katzenstein [2005]². According to this theory, two concepts are essential for Indian social

¹ 'Buddhist-Dalits' or 'converted-Buddhists' are ex-'Untouchables' who converted from Hinduism to Buddhism. In western Uttar Pradesh, most of them have their origins in the Jatav or Chamar community.

² Raka Ray and Mary Fainsod Katzenstein (eds.), 2005, *Social Movements in India: Poverty, Power, and Politics*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

movements, 'equality' and 'identity'. This theory is quite adequate for Dalit movements, especially for Buddhist movements. Buddhist-Dalits want to obtain 'equality' and to realize an 'identity' as an '*asī*' Buddhist.

At the same time, questions arise: Can Buddhist movements attain these ends? Regarding 'equality', some say that Buddhists are egalitarian, but how are they seen by other castes? Regarding 'identity', some point to the 'residual' caste consciousness and Hindu beliefs and practices among Buddhist-Dalits.

Concerning 'equality', we can raise the following question: 'What kind of "equality" do Buddhist-Dalits seek?' The answer must be 'equality with respect', that is, *barābarī* in Hindi. This 'equality' implies proper 'social recognition with respect' for Buddhists. Second, 'identity' is not a static but a dynamic concept, that is, in employing it, I am thinking of 'the process of identification'. In this sense, I am focusing on the process by which Buddhist-Dalits identify themselves as Buddhists or as Chamars. For this investigation, I am examining the religious and ritual practices of Buddhist-Dalits.

I demonstrate cases in which Buddhist-Dalits selectively and syncretistically observe some practices of Hinduism and Buddhism. This examination leads us to consider 'continuity', 'discontinuity', and 'social recognition', especially recognition by relatives.

I am thinking about the concept, 'social recognition with respect'. Where does this 'respect' come from? It comes from the Buddhist-Dalits' assertion of 'legitimacy'. First, they affirm that Buddhism is the original religion of Dalits, as Dr Ambedkar insisted. Second, they assert that Buddhism is a religion based on 'egalitarianism'.

Here I would like to present some narratives of the Buddhist-Dalits. These are narratives about their religious origins:

'We Indians were all Buddhists in ancient times. Buddhism is our old religion (*purānā dharm*). So we believe in Buddhism'.

(Male, Forties, Factory worker)

'Buddhism is fine because it is our ancestor's (*pūrvajom*) religion'.

(Male, Forties, Factory worker)

'We embraced Buddhism as Buddhism is our ancestor's religion. We didn't change our religion. We accepted our ancestor's religion'

(Male, Sixties, Farmer)

These are their narratives about Buddhism, regarding its ‘egalitarianism’:

‘We obtained respect (*sammān*) from Buddhism. Buddhism is the religion of our ancestors. We wanted to obtain respect (*sammān*) and equality (*samān*), and we received them from Buddhism. Buddhism is our ritual (*saṃskār*)’.

(Male, Sixties, Rickshaw puller)

‘There is inferiority (*hīntā*) in Hinduism. There is equality (*barābarī*) in Buddhism’.

(Male, Thirties, Truck driver)

‘I think Buddhism is good, because in Buddhism there is no significance to your name and your religion, and there is no status. In Buddhism, we can sit together regardless of our status. Even me, a prime minister, a president, or anyone, can sit together’.

(Male, Forties, Manual labourer)

We can point out from these narratives that Buddhist-Dalits want to have ‘equality’ not only politically and economically but also socially and culturally, that is, ‘equality with respect’. This perspective is essential in considering the practices of Buddhist-Dalits.

3. Field Data

3-1. About the Research

Now I will describe my field data. I conducted the first phase of my field research from February to May 2003 and June to October 2004 (a total of nine months) in Meerut, a city in western Uttar Pradesh. I researched Dalit movements, especially Buddhist movements (the Buddhist Society of India), including their organizations and leaders. The second phase of my field research was in March 2003, from April 2005 to February 2006, and in March 2009 (a total of thirteen months). I lived in Village V of the Muzaffarnagar district in western Uttar Pradesh and researched the everyday and ritual practices of Buddhist-Dalits.



Figure 1: Map of India

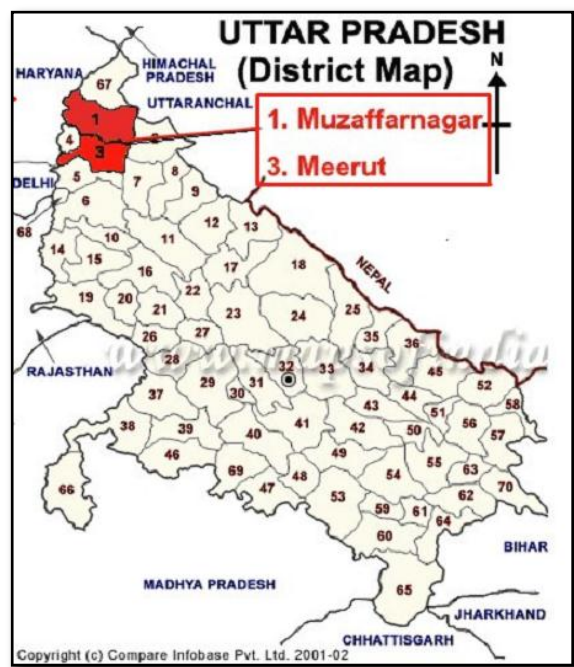


Figure 2: Map of Uttar Pradesh

Figure 3 is a map of Village V. The Chamar residential areas are shown in red; they are situated on the borders of the village. According to the 2001 census, the population of Village V was 3,982 in that year. The Chamars accounted for about 21% of the population (847 people), including Buddhists, of whom there were 237 (37 households; 120 males and 117 females)³.

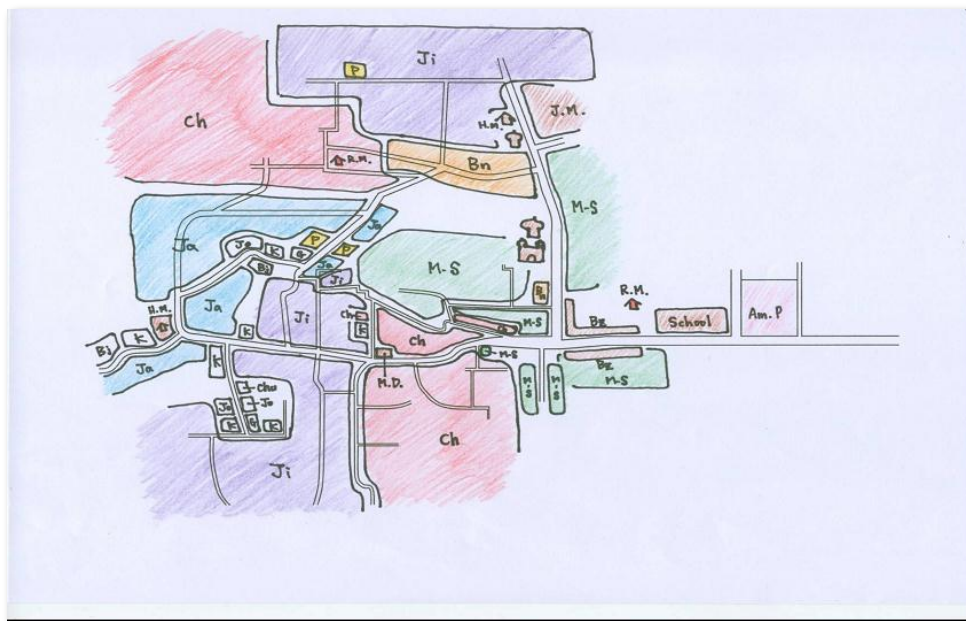


Figure 3: Map of Village V

³ The data of Buddhists were collected in March, 2009.

Figure 4 is a graph of the population make-up of Village V by ‘caste’. The most populous caste is the Kashyap (Jinwar), who are Other Backward Classes (OBCs), followed by the Chamar. The Chamar are the large ‘Untouchable’ community in North India. They have traditionally worked as tanners, leather workers, shoemakers, village servants, tenants, and so on. In Village V, they are mostly factory workers, agricultural labourers, and day labourers.

Most Buddhist-Dalits in Village V had a *Dīkṣā* (conversion) ceremony, which was led by leaders of the Meerut branch of the Buddhist Society of India in 1996. They adhere strongly to ‘egalitarianism’ and regard Buddhism as their ancestral and original religion, as we have seen. They also have great respect for Dr Ambedkar.

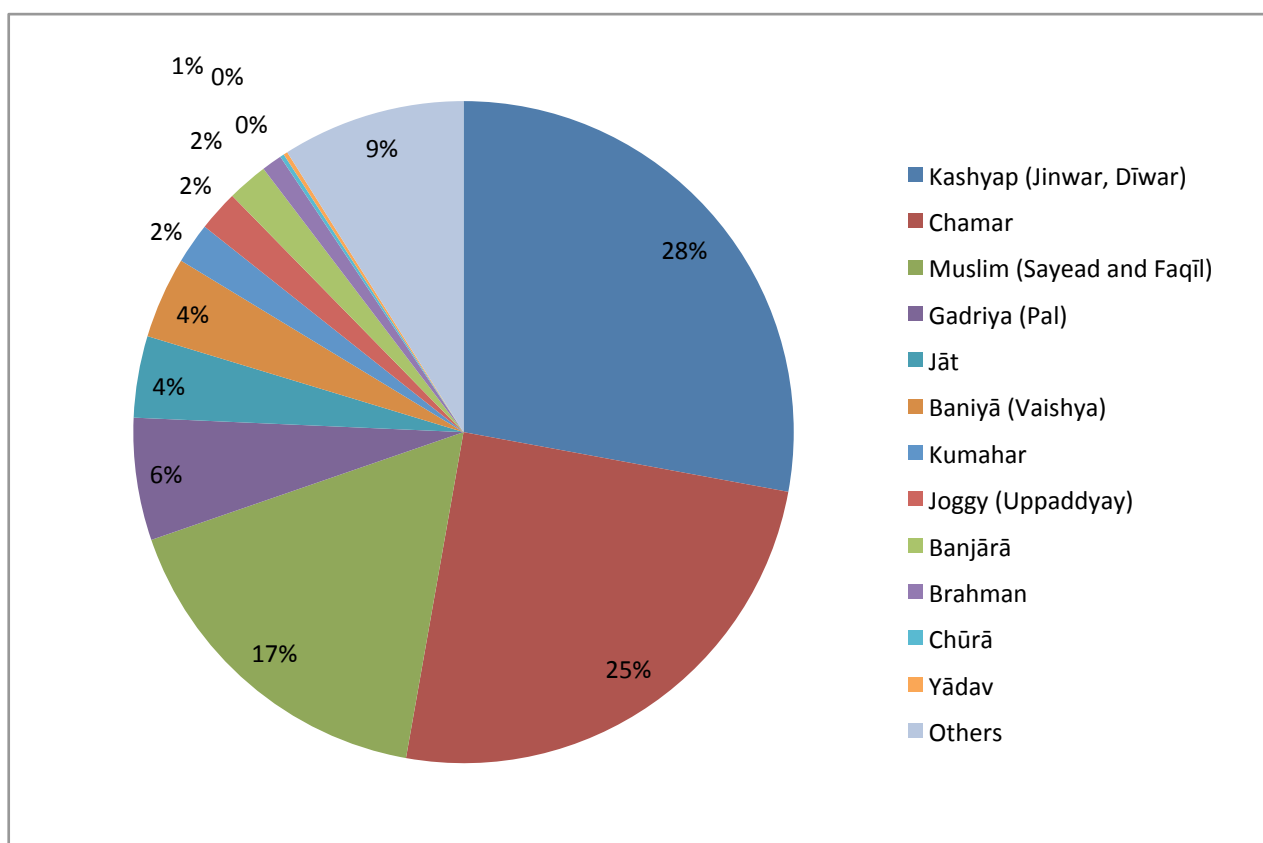


Figure 4: The population make-up of Village V by ‘Caste’

Figure 5 shows the genealogy of a man named Aman. He is a Buddhist-Dalit, and we can discern that not all of his relatives are Buddhists. In general, most of the people living in Village V are Buddhists, but the people who are living in other villages are not. A Buddhist-Dalit is living as a ‘minority’ among relatives who are mostly Hindus. We can regard a Buddhist-Dalit in Uttar Pradesh as ‘a minority within a minority’.

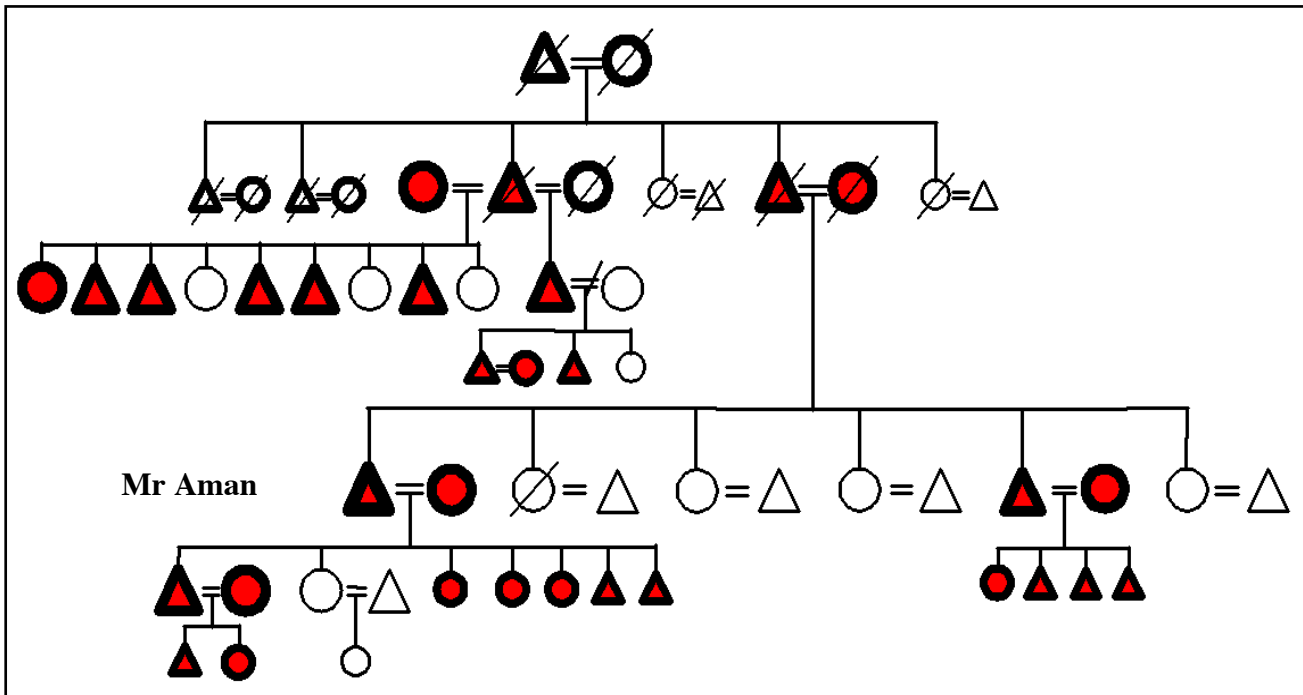


Figure 5: The genealogy of Aman’s family
(Bold: Living in Village V; Red: Buddhist)

3-2. Case Study: Religious-Ritual Practices of Buddhist-Dalits

Buddhist-Dalits selectively and syncretistically observe religious and ritual practices. It can be said that they selectively follow practices in order to maintain their relationships with Hindu relatives. We can also say that they syncretistically observe practices insisting on their identities as Buddhists. Their selective observation of certain practices is shown in the Dīwālī festival. In the Dīwālī festival, the third day is Dīwālī, which celebrates Lord Rāma; the fourth day is Gōvardhan Pūjā, which celebrates Lord Krishna, and the fifth day is Bhāī Dūj.

Photos 1 and 2 show Mr Aman’s family and relatives on the day of Bhāī Dūj. In case of the Aman family, they observed only Bhāī Dūj during the Dīwālī festival. Bhāī Dūj functions in maintaining a relationship with family and relatives, regardless of whether they are Hindus or Buddhists. The Aman family said, ‘This is a festival about brothers and sisters’.



Photo 1



Photo 2

The syncretistic observation of Buddhist-Dalit practices is revealed in a funeral ritual. **Photos 3** through **6** show the funeral of a Buddhist in village V. We can see the flag of Buddhism on many clothes, in **Photo 3**. The remains, covered by the clothes and the flag, were set in front of the house of the deceased with two portraits, one of Dr Ambedkar and one of the Buddha. They chanted Trisaran (*Sankie*, the Three Faith Statements of Buddhism) and Panchsheel (*Gokai*, the Five Buddhist Commandments) (**Photo 4**).



Photo 3



Photo 4

As **Photos 5** and **6** reveal, Buddhist-Dalits then went to the riverside and observed the body's cremation. Meanwhile, they repeatedly chanted Trisaran and Panchsheel.



Photo 5



Photo 6

From these two cases, the Dīwālī festival and a funeral ritual, I draw some important conclusions. First, in the Dīwālī festival we can say that Buddhist-Dalits selectively observed ritual practices, depending on their meaning and the function, in order to bond with family and relatives. Second, from the funeral ritual, it can be said that they syncretistically mixed some elements of Hinduism and Buddhism in order to insist on their own identities as Buddhists.

I would like to rethink the concepts ‘discontinuity’ and ‘continuity’ from these two cases. The concept of ‘discontinuity’ relates to the questions of whether Buddhist-Dalits can distance themselves from Hindu beliefs and practices. The concept of ‘continuity’ is linked to the negotiations of Buddhist-Dalits, that is, the negotiations to obtain social recognition, especially from their relatives. I think this perspective on ‘continuity’ is worth considering in order to grasp the situation of Buddhist-Dalits, ‘a minority within a minority’.

4. Concluding Remarks

I will now make a few concluding remarks. As I showed in this paper, Buddhist-Dalits observe religious-ritual practices selectively and syncretistically, depending on circumstances. They are trying to be *ashī* Buddhists, but their condition as a minority within a minority requires them to adopt some practices selectively and syncretistically. In other words, ideologically speaking, they negate the concept of ‘caste’ and Hinduism, but they also need to observe some Hindu practices to maintain relationships with Hindus.

With regard to ‘discontinuity’, the practice of conducting a medley of religious practices may be an unsatisfactory outcome of conversion. However, I think that we will achieve a better understanding of the situation of Buddhist-Dalits if we consider conversion not from the viewpoint of ‘discontinuity’, but from the viewpoint of ‘continuity’. On the one hand, Buddhist-Dalits try to follow ‘pure and authentic’, *aslī* Buddhist practices; on the other hand, they selectively or syncretistically continue to abide by certain Hindu practices. This is because Buddhist-Dalits need to negotiate with relatives who are mostly Hindus to determine their status and position in society. Two questions arise. When do Buddhist-Dalits go the way of ‘discontinuity,’ and when do they go the way of ‘continuity’? I think one important criterion is their consideration of *viśvās* or *andh-viśvās*. *Viśvās* means trust, confidence, faith, or belief in Hindi, and *andh-viśvās* signifies superstition. If they consider the situation that they are facing as one of *viśvās*, then they can follow certain practices. If they consider it as *andh-viśvās*, they cannot. However, sometimes they engage in practices that they regard as *andh-viśvās*⁴.

For instance, Mr Aman, who is a Buddhist-Dalit, has special knowledge of traditional cures and ‘mantras’. Therefore, he can conduct traditional treatments. One day, after he carried out a ‘traditional treatment’ at the request of one of his relatives who was a ‘Buddhist’ but not considered an *aslī* Buddhist, he said:

‘I think this is ‘*andh-viśvās*’, but it is not so bad for all of us because we can get a small reward from him, and the children will feel happy because of it. And he will also be happy with my treatment’.

I think this example well shows the interesting situation of the Buddhist-Dalits. The treatment can create a relationship with other relatives, even if it is recognized as *andh-viśvās*. Buddhist-Dalits are negotiating with others to obtain ‘social recognition’ as ‘a minority within a minority’. Buddhist-Dalits are eager to gain ‘equality’. The concept of ‘equality’ is very attractive to Buddhist-Dalits, and it makes them eager to receive ‘social recognition’ from others. This ‘social recognition’ gives them the sense of ‘equality with respect’, which is one of the main reasons for their conversion to Buddhism. 🙏

⁴ Actually, the practices of Buddhist-Dalits show much diversity, depending on the person or the family. Choices are quite open.