


Ambedkarite-Buddhists: From untouchables to the vanguards of social justice in India

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Abstract: *The use of religion for undoing the oppressive structures can be fraught with dangers as in doing so religion can be dragged into the political domain with the potential of conflict with ideological adversaries. Notwithstanding such dangers the experience of 5.8 million Ambedkarite-Buddhists in India is unique. Drawing on the social movement theory, empirical work on the role of Black religion/church in the civil rights movement and author's two-decade experience in Buddhist and anti-caste movement, this paper maps contribution of Ambedkarite Buddhists to the anti-caste social movement and more importantly, explains why Ambedkarite Buddhists participate disproportionately more in the social justice movement. The author argues 1) Buddhist beliefs supporting social justice movement provide cognitive and emotional resources, 2) Ambedkar framed the socio-political canvas and his work laid the foundation for organizational resources, 3) Caste composition of newly converted Buddhists creates group consciousness and 4) Continuation of caste-based oppression creates political opportunity (or more appropriately a threat) resulting in mobilization of organizational and cognitive resources for the social justice movement. This study gives an insight into how the interaction of non-religious thought (Ambedkar's in this case) with religious thought (Buddhist) can be used as a theoretical frame to analyze the role of religious actors in the social movement.*

Keywords: Ambedkarite-Buddhists, Neo-Buddhists, Navyana, Anti-Caste Movements, Buddhism in India.

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1. Introduction

It appears that the debate about the role and jurisdiction of religion in people's socio-political lives in the modern era is not settled either from normative or from empirical perspectives, not at least in India, my context of this study (Galanter, 1965). The debate has intensified in India after the victory of the right-wing Hindu nationalist political party -Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP)- in the 2014 general elections. BJP has been accused of making decisive overreach of religion in secular socio-political affairs including discriminatory treatment to the members of minority religions communities (Jaffrelot, 2019). The secularists' solution to this problem of overreach religion in secular life or decline of secularism is the argument that religion should be consigned to the private life.

The more extreme solution to this problem has been provided by the orthodox Marxists who argue that religion acts as an opiate on mass political consciousness by keeping people preoccupied with otherworldly matters thus making religion an instrument of political domination rather than emancipation (Harris, 1994). However, there are others, equally concerned with the emancipation of the masses as Marx was, who argue that religion is not only an instrument of political domination but can also be an instrument of social change. And therefore, whereas the dominating role of religion needs to be controlled by instruments of the state, masses cannot and should not remain away from religion while simultaneously participating in socio-political life to better their material life. This was one of the main arguments of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (Galanter, 1965, pp. 149-150) who is considered as the champion of the rights of the victims of the caste system in India and intellectual pioneer of the modern anti-caste movement. After converting to Buddhism on October 14, 1956, along with thousands of his followers, in his historical speech¹ next day Ambedkar argued:

Religion is a very necessary thing for the progress of mankind. I know that a sect has appeared because of the writings of Karl Marx. According to their creed, religion means nothing at all. Religion is not important to them...I agree that an economic elevation movement is necessary. I am not against that movement. Man must progress economically. (Para 13)

Religion is necessary for the poor. Religion is necessary for people in distress. The poor man lives on hope. The source of life is hope. If this hope is destroyed, then how will life go on? Religion makes one hopeful, and to those in pain, to the poor, it gives a message: "Don't be afraid; life will be hopeful, it will be." So poor and distressed mankind clings to religion. (Para 26)

¹ The speech titled *Why was Nagpur chosen?* is curated online by Frances Pritchett for Columbia University and can be accessed here: http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/txt_ambedkar_conversion.html#13, last accessed on October 25, 2020.

The experience of the Black church and its members in the USA provides interesting evidence of the role of religion in the civil rights movement. In fact, Houck and Dixon, in the introduction to their seminal work *Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965* admit that after listening to over 100 speeches of civil rights leaders they realized that “civil rights was fundamentally a religious affair” (Houck & Dixon, 2006, p. 2). We can find the resonance of this view in current development approaches also where religion is assumed to mobilize spiritual resources for ensuring justice and development of oppressed and poor masses (Haar, 2011).

Drawing on the theoretical foundations of research done on the role of Black people and the Black church in the USA, an attempt has been made in this paper to map the similar contribution of Ambedkarite Buddhists to the social justice movement in the state of Maharashtra, India. More importantly, the author tries to explain how and why Ambedkarite Buddhists have succeeded in transcending the personal religious domain and entering into the secular public domain to effect transformative social change in the lives of millions of excluded people while simultaneously maintaining their commitment to India’s secular constitution. The term "Ambedkarite-Buddhists" is often used in the Buddhist and anti-caste movement discourse in India and indicates those Buddhists-also called Neo-Buddhists- who got converted to Buddhism along with Dr. Ambedkar in 1956 or thereafter and practice Buddhism as interpreted by Dr. Ambedkar. The term "social justice movement" is used in this paper to denote contemporary anti-caste movements and politics.

2. Role of Black Christians in the social justice movement: Learning for Ambedkarite Buddhists

The discussion on the experience of Black people in the USA in a paper on Ambedkarite Buddhists in India is important for three reasons. First, Blacks were (and are) fighting against racial oppression so were (and are) Ambedkarite Buddhists against caste-based oppression. Second, both the communities considered religion as an instrument of social change and made active use of religion in the social justice movement approximately during the same period. In India, this happened post-1956 conversion and in the USA, the civil rights movement peaked in the 1960s. Third, the experience of Black people and church is well studied by US academia and therefore provides a rich body of theoretical tools for the analytical purpose which is not the case in the case of Ambedkarite Buddhists.

There are strong disagreements among scholars on the effect of religion on the political participation of Blacks (Harris, 1994). Initial work on the role of the Black church and religious actors considered and found evidence in support of Karl Marx's argument that religion is opium. Harris concludes that most social science research on the role of religion in the political life of Blacks portrays “religion as an agent of Black oppression” (1994, p. 43). One such influential work was that of Gary Marx from MIT who used survey research methodology to study Black attitudes in the 1960s and found an inverse relationship between the intensity of religious beliefs and

involvement in social justice movements (Marx, 1967). However, a decade later using the same dataset which Gary Marx used, Hunt and Hunt found that religion can act both as an opiate and inspiration for social justice movements depending upon which dimensions of religious life dominate Hunt and Hunt (1977). James Cone in his seminal work *A Black Theology of Liberation* (2010) radically reappraised Christianity from the perspective of oppressed Black communities in the United States. According to this view, the Christian gospel preaches social ethics namely kindness and compassion towards the oppressed and the overturning of all distinctions including master and slave. Houck and Dixon after reviewing 130 speeches of Black leaders and clergy from 1954-1965 show how these leaders deployed religious rhetoric to upset the racial status quo during the civil rights movements (Houck & Dixon, 2006).

Harris by exploring multidimensional aspects of religion and their impact on political action tried to explain how religion has helped Blacks in the civil rights movement. He found that religion among Blacks served both as an organizational and psychological resource for individual and collective political action Harris (1994). And such a positive role of the Black church in the social justice movement is found not only among Protestants (of which the majority are Blacks) but also among Catholics (Cavendish, 2000). Morris considered the Black church as “agency laden institutions” which he defines as “those institutions, often long-standing, developed by potential challenging groups that house cultural and organizational resources that can be mobilized to launch collective action”. Adding, for centuries, the Black church has condemned racial inequality because it goes against ultimate religious values and goes to the extent of calling the Black church the “vanguard of historic Black struggle” (Morris, 2000, p. 447).

3. Analytical framework

As discussed in the previous section, research on the role of the Black church provides a good foundation and a rich set of theoretical tools for creating an analytical framework for studying the role of Ambedkarite Buddhists in the social justice movement in India. Various theories have emerged to explain why people participate in social movements (Staggenborg, 2011). For analyzing the participation of Ambedkarite Buddhists, I find two theories relevant which are also currently popular: Resource mobilization and Political process theories. The resource mobilization theory tells us that for collective action to emerge there is a need for resources. These resources can be tangible (funds) or intangible (commitment). Another typology of resources is that resources can be classified as moral, cultural, socio-organizational, human, or material resources (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004 in Staggenborg, 2011). Thus, this theory explains the social movement based on a supply-side perspective. On the other hand, political process theory uses a demand-side perspective. It tells us that social movements emerge when there is "political opportunity (or threat)" in the external environment which creates favorable conditions for participation. These opportunities can include openness in the polity, shifts in political alignments, divisions among elites, the availability of influential allies, and repression or facilitation by the state (Tarrow, 1998 in Staggenborg, 2011). These two theories are seen as two sides of the same

approach which is still evolving and therefore can be referred to together as the “synthetic approach” for studying social movements (McAdam et al 1988, 1996 Staggenborg, 2011). This approach got further strengthened with the addition of the concept of cultural framing which means social movement leaders and organizations play a role of constructing a cultural meaning of prevalent issues or situations which when combined with resources and opportunities results in collective action (Staggenborg, 2011).

With this background, I now propose a specific framework to explain and analyze the role of Ambedkarite-Buddhists in the social justice movement. For this purpose, I found the analytical framework used by Harris to study the political activism of Blacks in the USA quite useful (1994, pp. 50-52). This framework—which is actually an adaptation of already discussed resource mobilization theory—is depicted in Figures 1 and 2.

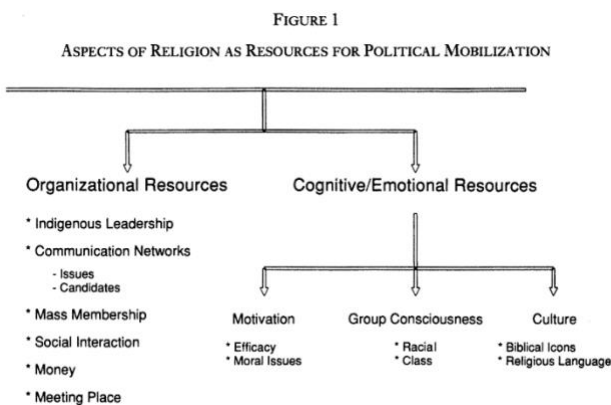


Figure 1 (Source: Harris, 1994)
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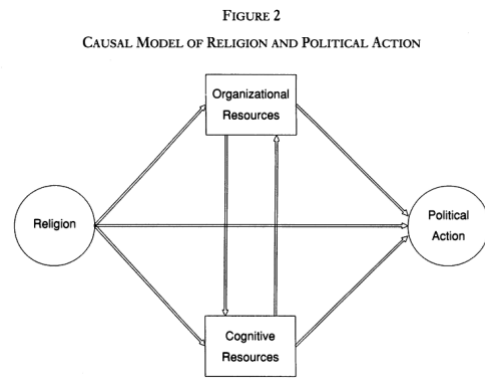


Figure 2 (Source: Harris, 1994)

Figure 1 outlines the two types of resources- organizational resources and cognitive/emotional resources. It also shows specific types of resources under these two categories that religion makes available to its followers. Figure 2 explains the causal model between religion and political (and also social in the present case) action through the mediating and interactive role of organizational and cognitive/emotional resources. In subsequent sections, I will discuss how this model can be used to explain the role of Ambedkarite Buddhists in the social justice movement.

4. The Context: Post 1956 conversions to Buddhism in the state of Maharashtra

As mentioned earlier, Ambedkarite Buddhists are those Buddhists who converted to Buddhism from Hinduism and other religions² in 1956 and after, because of the inspiration and

² Some people including my own and extended family members were followers of Mahanubhav and Kabir Panths, though these are called sects and not religions according to Census of India, in reality, they are not part of Hindu religion and the followers do not identify as Hindus.

teachings of their emancipator Dr. B.R. Ambedkar³. As per the 2011 Census of India, the population of Ambedkarite Buddhists in Maharashtra is approximately 5.8 million (73 percent of total Buddhists in India) which is the geographical focus of this paper. Before conversion, almost all of these Buddhists were placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy and dubbed as untouchables according to the rules of the caste system followed by Hindus. Since the beginning of untouchability around 400 A.D., they were deprived of their due in the social, religious, political, and economic life of India (Volume 1, 5, 7, 9 in Ambedkar, 1979-2009a). According to Ambedkar⁴, untouchability was born out of the struggle for supremacy between Buddhism and Brahmanism. The fight against untouchability and the caste system has continued ever since these oppressive structures and practices came into being (Omvedt, 2008, 2012, 2014). However, a major change in the condition of untouchables occurred when Ambedkar, himself an untouchable, entered the social movement around 1920. Over the next 36 years, he organized a series of social and political struggles against the caste system and secured civil and political rights for untouchables and other victims of the caste system (Jaffrelot, 2005; Omvedt, 2004). With Ambedkar's efforts, a major breakthrough happened in 1935 when the then British government of India provided them representation in the legislatures, higher education, and civil services and designated the untouchable castes as Scheduled⁵ Castes (SC hereafter) under Government of India Act-1935. The next major development was in 1949 when SCs secured some additional safeguards (including Article 17 which officially abolished untouchability) in India's Constitution which was drafted by Ambedkar himself.

However, during the course of his fight against the caste system, Ambedkar realized that the caste system has a sacred basis in Hinduism, and therefore unless that basis is removed, the caste system cannot be annihilated. He articulated these ideas in his seminal work in 1936 called *The Annihilation of Caste*. However, there was no possibility that Ambedkar's suggestion for removal of the sacred basis of the caste system would be agreed by the Hindus, Gandhi himself objected to his suggestion. Therefore, in 1935 at the Yeola conference in Maharashtra Ambedkar announced his decision to quit Hinduism and officially converted to Buddhism on October 14, 1956, along with 500,000 of his followers in Nagpur, Maharashtra. Ambedkar died on December 06, 1956, but conversions to Buddhism continued at various places even after his death. The Census of India recorded a huge increase in the population of Buddhists in Maharashtra at 2,789,501 in 1961 up from the figure of only 2,489 in 1951 (Sangharakshita, 1986, p. 13). As mentioned earlier, the current population of Buddhists in Maharashtra is 5.8 million which

³ Two speeches of Dr. Ambedkar can be cited as most important and path-breaking in this respect. First on May 31, 1936, at Mumbai titled "What Path to Salvation" where he explained to the large gathering of untouchables why they should change their religion. The second important speech was at Nagpur on October 15, 1956, titled "Why was Nagpur chosen?" addressing thousands of his followers whom he converted to Buddhism on October 14, 1956, where he dwelled on salient features of Buddhism and the responsibility of converted Buddhists.

⁴ Ambedkar, Volume 5, *Untouchables: Who were they and why they became?*

⁵ For the purpose of constitutional safeguards, the untouchables were listed under a constitutional schedule, hence the name.

corresponds to about 43.6 percent of the total (13.3 million) SC population of Maharashtra. Buddhists constitute 0.7 percent of India's population, 73 percent of whom live in Maharashtra alone (Census 2011). Whereas not all Buddhists are SCs but non-SCs are the exception rather than the rule in the total population.

5. How do Ambedkarite Buddhists contribute to the social justice movement?

The massive voluntary conversions in a short span of time by oppressed communities in India indicate their aspiration for social change and their hope that Buddhism would help them in restructuring the Indian society to make it a just society (Yurlova, 2004). Their multifaceted contribution to the non-religious social justice movement thus reflects their commitment to fulfill the project of creating a just society. This contribution can be summed from 10 different dimensions as:

1. Ambedkarite Buddhists provided the leadership for almost all political parties⁶ in Maharashtra whose, stated objective and ideology included annihilation of caste and creation of a just society
2. The leadership and office bearers of major social movement organizations⁷ working in the anti-caste movement in Maharashtra are mostly drawn from Ambedkarite Buddhists
3. All major struggles against caste-based atrocities in Maharashtra are organized and supported by Ambedkarite Buddhists⁸
4. Ambedkarite-Buddhists are in the forefront of the struggle for expansion and effective implementation of reservations (affirmative action) policy not only for SCs but also for STs and OBCs which has strengthened representative democracy in India (Ch.11 in Christophe Jaffrelot, 2003)
5. Ambedkarite Buddhists are at the forefront of production and dissemination of all popular secular and critical literature used in the social justice movement (Beltz, 2005; Bhoite & Bhoite, 1977)⁹

⁶ To name a few, Bahujan Samaj Party, Bahujan Republican Paksha Bahujan Mahasangh and its recent version Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi, Bahujan Republican Socialist Party, Republican Party of India (almost all groups), Bahujan Mukti Party, Ambedkarite Party of India, and People's Party of India (Democratic). Interestingly none of these parties mention Buddhism in their names, though their major vote base is Buddhists.

⁷ Some names: All groups of All India Backward and Minorities Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF) & their off-shoots, Samata Sainik Dal, All India Mulnivasi Bahujan Samaj Central Sangh.

⁸ Role of following notable organizations can be cited in this regard: Manuski which also runs portal <https://atrocitynews.wordpress.com/> to highlight atrocities, Dalit Adivasi Adhikar Andolan, Manavi Hakka Abhiyan, Dr. Ambedkar Sheti Vikas Va Sanshodhan Sanstha and National Dalit Movement for Justice.

⁹ According to Beltz (2005), "The Buddhists are credited with having created their own literature in different fields: poetry, prose, autobiographies, political publications, and magazines (p.114)...To realize the crucial role that literature plays for this movement, one needs only to witness a public Buddhist festival in Mumbai, Nagpur, or Pune [in Maharashtra] and visit the innumerable booksellers and look at their range (they often display their products on a large piece of cloth spread on the ground) and collect a number of propaganda leaflets (p.115)."

6. Ambedkarite Buddhists play an important role in the production and popularization of various art forms of the victims of the caste system which has acted as a catalyst in the popular movement (Beltz, 2005; Tartakov, 1990)¹⁰
7. Ambedkarite Buddhists are at the forefront¹¹ of many Employees' Associations in Local, State and Federal Government and quasi-Government Organizations meant for the welfare and protection of employees from SC, ST (Schedule Tribes) and OBCs (Other Backward Classes) from discrimination at workplace¹²
8. Many of the educational institutions, libraries, and hostels meant for students from non-privileged backgrounds, with a fertile environment for anti-caste movements, are run by Ambedkarite Buddhists¹³
9. Ambedkarite Buddhists (migrated from Maharashtra, the focus of this study) are also represented in excess of their population proportion in the leadership cadre of all socio-political organizations working for securing social justice outside Maharashtra including those working abroad (Kumar, 2004)
10. Most of the web-based and social media platforms with anti-caste objectives are led, facilitated, or managed by Ambedkarite Buddhists¹⁴.

One limitation of these examples of the contribution of Ambedkarite Buddhists is that they are based on my subjective qualitative assessments rooted in my two-decade association with the social justice movement as an Ambedkarite Buddhist and there could be a bias in making these observations. However, these examples of contributions of Ambedkarite Buddhists can be taken as hypotheses and can be empirically tested in the future, and stimulating such research is also the prime purpose of writing this paper and in this sense my research is exploratory. We can also supplement these examples with other socio-economic indicators and practices of Ambedkarite

¹⁰ Beltz (2005) in Chapter 4 *Buddhism: Discourse of revolt, liberation, and emancipation* describes in detail the role that Ambedkarite Buddhist poetry, popular music, and theater play in advancing the movement. Of Ambedkarite Buddhist songs, Beltz notes "If one were to read these songs attentively, the recurrent message is the same history of liberation and emancipation of the untouchables. For popular theatre Tamasha he says, "Many Buddhist associations resorted to this [popular theater] form of communication to awaken the conscience of their community and to propagate Buddhism" (p.131).

¹¹ D.K. Khaparde was one such Ambedkarite Buddhist who eventually cofounded BAMCEF, perhaps the strongest social organization fighting for social justice in post Ambedkarite era.

¹² There is no concrete database on this, however, a portal managed by Ambedkarite Buddhists lists some of these organizations: <http://www.navayan.com/organizations.php?cat=government>, last assessed on November 27, 2015. The author's own experience of working with multiple organizations in this respect attests to the fact that Ambedkarite Buddhists are at the forefront.

¹³ This role is inspired by the emphasis Ambedkar put on education for the liberation of the oppressed and who himself founded People's Education Society. Though there is no reliable database of such organizations at present, one website lists some of the organizations: <http://www.navayan.com/organizations.php?cat=educational&page=1> last assessed on November 27, 2015. Nagarjuna Training Institute, Nagaloka, and Pradnya Prabodhini Library in Nagpur, Nalanda Academy in Wardha and Manuski, and Dapodi Mahavihara in Pune are some of the notable examples.

¹⁴ Some notable examples are: www.ambedkar.org, <http://roundtableindia.co.in/>, <https://velivada.com>, <http://www.navayan.com/buddhist-website-blog.php?page=1>, and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Caravan, a Facebook page Last assessed on October 16, 2020.

Buddhists which promote social justice. According to *Census 2001 report Distribution of Population by Religions*, on gender equality/women empowerment, economic mobility, family planning, and education, Buddhists are way ahead of other major religions such as Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs and if we control for class (income levels), these indicators will be far better among Buddhists as the majority of Buddhists (73 percent are in Maharashtra and include almost all converted in or after 1956) are former untouchables with lower starting assets/income levels and are first or second-generation school goers.¹⁵ The prevalence of other socio-cultural practices that promote social justice also appears to be higher among Ambedkarite Buddhists. For example, in one recent survey on the prevalence of untouchability, it was found that only 1 percent of Buddhists practice untouchability as compared to 35 percent Hindus and surprisingly 18 percent and 5 percent of Muslims and Christians respectively (Chishti, 2014).

6. Why do Ambedkarite Buddhists contribute disproportionately more to the social justice movement?

Using the analytical framework discussed above, I propose the following four complementary hypotheses, to explain why Ambedkarite Buddhists might be contributing disproportionately more to the social justice movement:

Hypothesis 1: The religious beliefs of Buddhism support social justice and oppose injustice. These beliefs provide cognitive/emotional resources to Ambedkarite Buddhists.

Hypothesis 2: Ambedkar's ideas and movement led to the creation of cultural frames aligned to Buddhism and organizational resources which get deployed for the social movement.

Hypothesis 3: The caste composition of Ambedkarite Buddhists creates a group consciousness which in turn facilitates their participation in the social justice movement.

Hypothesis 4: Continuation of caste-based oppression or slow progress in relief thereof, creates political opportunity (or more appropriately a threat) resulting in mobilization of organizational and cognitive resources for social justice movement.

¹⁵ Some of these indicators of Indian Buddhists in comparison to other religious groups according to the same report of Census 2001 are: 1) Sex ratio is higher; at 953 as against 931 among Hindus, 936 among Muslims, 893 among Sikhs and 940 among Jains. 2) Fertility level is lower; the percentage of 0 to 6 population is lower at 14.4 percent as against 15.6 among Hindus and 18.7 among Muslims and 18 among other religions. 3) Child sex ratio is higher; at 942 as against 925 among Hindus, 786 among Sikhs, and 870 among Jains. 4) Overall literacy is higher; at 72.7 percent as against 65.1 among Hindus, 59.1 among Muslims, and 69.4 among Sikhs. 5) Female literacy is higher; at 61.7 percent as against 53.2 among Hindus, 50.1 among Muslims, and 33.2 among other religions. 6) Work participation is higher at 40.6 percent second only to other religions at 48.4 percent. Also see this news report based on the census report https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/converted-buddhists-enjoy-better-literacy-gender-equality-than-sc-hindus-117070100255_1.html last accessed on October 19, 2020.

Hypothesis 1: Religious beliefs of Buddhism support social justice and oppose injustice. These beliefs provide cognitive/emotional resources to Ambedkarite Buddhists.

Untouchables under the leadership of Ambedkar decided to convert because they thought their current religion was depriving them of justice and equality. And therefore, while searching for a new religion, justice, freedom, and equality had become criteria to test the suitability of the new religion.¹⁶ According to Ambedkar, Buddhism passed these criteria. Thus, to say that the religious beliefs of Buddhism promoted social justice and provided cognitive/emotional resources would only be partly correct. Its other side is, untouchables chose the religion which had those beliefs which could be useful as resources in their endeavor to transform the world (Gokhale, 2004, p. 121 ; Henry, 2013, p. 166 ; Gokhale in Jondhale & Beltz, 2004, p. 121; Sangharakshita, 1986, p. 112). Ambedkar asserts that *Dhamma* (religion) to be *Saddhamma* (good religion) must pull down all social barriers by breaking down barriers between man and man, by teaching that worth and not birth is the measure of man, and by promoting equality between man and man. Ambedkar explains in his seminal book *The Buddha and His Dhamma* under the section *Dhamma to be Saddhamma must pull down all social barriers* (Book 3 Part V Section IV) how Buddhist beliefs fulfill the above criteria. According to him, Buddha opposed *Chaturvarna*, the theory of ideal society upheld by the Brahmins and preached to the people, because it was based on inequality, “Buddha opposed it root and branch, was the strongest opponent of caste and the earliest and staunchest upholder of equality. There is no argument in favor of caste and inequality which he did not refute” (Ambedkar, 2011, pp. 161-162).

It is important to understand here that Ambedkar’s interpretation of Buddhism as a project to create a just society is very important in the sense that it is deeply contextual. Harris, while explaining why Black Christians in the USA were able to contribute to the civil rights movement, draws on a very important characteristic of the religion, that is, “multi-dimensionality”. According to him, the studies which investigated the link between Black religion and political action neglected “diversity of religion as belief and expression, and the potentially different impacts of different religious forms on political participation” (Harris, 1994, p. 48). Harris indicates that different dimensions of religion may be emphasized in different contexts. For example, for some, Buddhism may be important for personal transformation, for others how Buddhism influences social relations may be important and there might be some others for whom a combination of both may be important. For Ambedkar, during his times in India and the world, beliefs emphasizing just social relations were more important (Gokhale, 2004 in Ambedkar, 2011, p. 151 ; Gokhale, 2004). Similar was an emphasis on social justice when in the early part of the 20th century, untouchables from Tamilnadu, a southern state in India, decided to adopt Buddhism and drawing on those beliefs, worked for the transformation of the society (Aloysius, 1998; Narasu, 1907). Thus multi-dimensionality of religion makes it possible for us to explain that the same religion in a

¹⁶ A careful reading of Ambedkar’s speech on May 31, 1936, at Mumbai titled *What Path to Salvation* in front of a large gathering of untouchables, tells us that he outlined these criteria, and people accepted it by agreeing to convert.

different context may have a different impact on society. For example, we do hear complaints¹⁷ that Buddhists in Myanmar and Srilanka are committing injustice to non-Buddhist minorities in those countries indicating a very opposite contextual manifestation of the behavior of the followers of Buddhism. I would speculate that my four hypotheses along with the principle of multi-dimensionality could be deployed for explaining the unjust behavior of a section of Buddhists in Srilanka and Myanmar. In the context of India since Buddhism is said to have emerged as a "moral system in opposition to Brahminism" (Burnouf, 1876 in Durkheim, 2001, p. 32) which was perceived as causing injustice to the victims of the caste system, its foundation was laid on the principles of justice (Blumenthal, 2009). Thus we find that Ambedkar's understanding of Buddhism was in agreement with Burnouf's and also Durkheim's. The current scholarship suggests that Ambedkar's ideas were influenced by his philosophy teacher at Columbia University John Dewey whose ideas of democracy, freedom, equality, education, and social transformation (Stroud, 2017) he deployed for understanding over 2000 years old Buddhism in the contemporary context. Meera Nanda goes to the extent of calling Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism promoting social justice and posing a radical challenge to inequality, a "Deweyan-Buddhist view" (Nanda, 2003).

Ambedkar understood the importance of the Buddhist principles in realizing his project of a just society and therefore made sure that all newly converted Buddhists not only follow these principles but also work towards realizing them. He ensured this by making it mandatory for a new convert to take, what is now considered as an important Buddhist practice, "22 Vows" which he himself had drafted and administered to the thousands of his followers whom he converted in 1956. The following vows need special mention in this regard: Vow No. 7: I shall not act in a manner violating the principles and teachings of the Buddha. Vow No. 9: I shall believe in the equality of man. Vow No. 10: I shall endeavor to establish equality. Vow No. 13: I shall have compassion and loving-kindness for all living beings and protect them (Ambedkar, 2011, p. xxi). Through these vows Ambedkar made sure that Buddhists do not distract from the core beliefs/ethics of Buddhism and continue to walk on the path of social justice. In a way, this was Ambedkar's "reinvention of egalitarian religion" (Beltz in Jondhale & Beltz, 2004, pp. 7-10) and so profoundly that some Buddhist scholars like Balkrishna Gokhale observed, through Ambedkar (and Anagarika Dhammapala) "what was once perceived as an ascetic and renunciatory paradigm was turned into an instrument of political action and social activism" (Gokhale, 1999 in Ambedkar, 2011, p. xxi). According to Pradeep Gokhale, another Buddhist scholar, Ambedkar's reconstruction of Buddhism may or may not be a deviation from "original" Buddhism though it is a deviation from "traditional" Buddhism (Gokhale, 2004, p. 124). To conclude, Ambedkarite Buddhism did provide immense cognitive/emotional resources for its adherents to enable them to work for the social justice

¹⁷For more details see The darker side of Buddhism in <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-32929855> , Sri Lanka's violent Buddhists in http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/03/opinion/sri-lankas-violent-buddhists.html?_r=0 and Why are Buddhist monks attacking Muslims in <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-22356306> last accessed on November 26, 2020.

movement. These religious beliefs in the case of former untouchables- to borrow the phrase used by Harris for Black religion- “preserved humanity for many while motivating some to rebel” Harris (1994, p. 45).

Hypothesis 2: Ambedkar’s ideas and movement contributed to the creation of cultural frames aligned to Buddhism and organizational resources which get deployed for the social movement.

Ambedkar analyzed the prevailing social situation and awakened the people about the injustice meted out to them for centuries. He framed the new sense of history and culture which the victims of the caste system could identify with (Ambedkar, 1979-2009a)¹⁸. He not only provided them the goal to annihilate the caste¹⁹ but also provided them the pathway to move towards it in his popular slogan “educate, organize and agitate”. He put the struggle of the oppressed on high moral grounds by making it clear that their struggle was not merely for material gains but for reclamation of human personality as can be seen in the following speech:

My final words of advice to you are educate, agitate, and organize; have faith in yourself. With justice on our side, I do not see how we can lose our battle. The battle to me is a matter of joy. The battle is in the fullest sense spiritual. There is nothing material or social in it. For ours is a battle, not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of human personality (Ambedkar during an address to All India Depressed Classes Conference in Nagpur, on July 18, 1942).

Ambedkar’s movement unfolded mass awakening programs which became a very important part of the social movement organizational routine from his times. The rationale for such awakening programs was/is in his famous remark often used in oral tradition in Maharashtra that “if you tell the slave that he is a slave, he will revolt”. Thus awakening of “slaves” -the term Ambedkar used sometimes for the untouchables to emphasize the gravity of the problem²⁰- became an important part of not only pre-conversion but also post-conversion institutional practice similar to what Paulo Friere calls conscientization (Freire, 2000). Whereas Ambedkar emphasized the moral regeneration of society through an egalitarian religion, he was pragmatic enough to understand that democratic capture of state power was also important to get necessary policy and

¹⁸ Specifically, in his works *Untouchables: Who were they and why they became Untouchables* and *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India*.

¹⁹ His undelivered speech published with the same title in 1936.

²⁰ In his famous address to untouchables on May 31, 1936, What path to salvation, making a case for religious conversion from Hinduism, Ambedkar uses terms “slave” and “slavery” (for untouchables and untouchability respectively) 27 times. Source: http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/txt_ambedkar_salvation.html#11 last accessed on October 18, 2020.

legal framework to bring about changes in the social and economic life of the oppressed.²¹ Therefore, as oral tradition goes, he asked his followers, who did not even have basic necessities for survival, to go and write on their walls that they have to become the ruling class- one of the most powerful dictums of the time many Ambedkarite Buddhists keep reminding themselves. It was as part of this power-sharing scheme that he secured civil, political, and economic rights most importantly the right to education and the right to representation in governance (equivalent to affirmative action policy popularly called reservation policy in India) which laid the foundation for future struggle.

Ambedkar understood that centuries of oppression, especially the denial of the right to education, has left a huge void in the intellectual capital which was very important for the sustained struggle for social justice. Therefore, he created a huge literature on almost all aspects of the anti-caste movement, laying the intellectual foundations of the movement after him.²² Alongside, he created social, religious, and political organizations²³ which provided organizational resources for decades after him and multiplied depending upon the dynamics of the situation. One notable grass root institution Ambedkar inaugurated needs special mention. It is called *Buddha Vihara*, the equivalent of a Black church, which has Buddha's idol, sometimes a small library and a place to meet where Buddhists congregate for meditation and Buddhist practice and more importantly learn about Buddhism, the secular world including Ambedkar and organize. After Ambedkar, almost every large village or urban neighborhood had either Vihara, Buddha's, and/or Ambedkar's statues or at least some space around Ambedkarite-Buddhist flagpole and formal or informal Buddhist association which acted as a very important local organizational resource. To summarize, we find that the way Ambedkar framed the issues of the times and created organizational resources discussed above, that complemented the Buddhist beliefs and catalyzed the participation of Ambedkarite Buddhists in the social justice movement.

Hypothesis 3: Caste²⁴ composition of Ambedkarite Buddhists creates a group consciousness which in turn facilitates their participation in the social justice movement.

As mentioned earlier, almost all of the people who converted to Buddhism under the leadership of Ambedkar, were former untouchables. Some non-untouchables- the touchable

²¹ See Ambedkar's *What Congress and Gandhi have done to Untouchables?* (1945)

²² Some of which has been published by himself and after his death by the Government of Maharashtra in the form of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings And Speeches (BAWAS) (Vol. 1-22) (B.R. Ambedkar, 1979-2009b).

²³ The organizations he founded included: The Buddhist Society of India, Samta Sainik Dal (The organization of the soldiers for equality), Independent Labor Party, The all India Scheduled Castes Federation, and the Republican Party of India.

²⁴ The reference to caste consciousness here is not about the consciousness of/about one's own/single caste but of/about a group of castes, similar to an idea of social class. Class in this context is interpreted as a social class such as Scheduled Castes (former untouchables), Scheduled Tribes (indigenous tribes), and Other Backward Classes (touchable victims of caste system), each class here is made of different individual castes which are closer to each other in the social hierarchy in the given class than outside. In an economic sense, most of the Ambedkarite Buddhists are poor as caste-based oppression caused economic deprivation.

victims of the caste system- have started converting to Buddhism in the last few years. Thus all of them being oppressed creates a group consciousness which is similar to what Harris (1994) and Cavendish (2000) found in the members of the Black church as against in white church. This heightened group consciousness, I would argue, when interacting with other factors described in other hypotheses, is responsible for the disproportionately higher role Ambedkarite Buddhists play in the social justice movement. Though there is no concrete evidence, through the 10 examples I gave in Section 5 based on my own experience as an Ambedkarite-Buddhist and social activist over two decades with multiple social organizations in multiple geographies across the country, I would argue that, if we compare the activism of Ambedkarite Buddhists with that of non-Ambedkarite Buddhists (converted from those who did not face caste discrimination and/or were treated as untouchables) we can find a difference and make out how group consciousness might be playing a role. In fact, Ambedkar was particular in maintaining this group (caste) consciousness is evident from his annoyance with the Mahabodhi Society of India²⁵ for the appointment of Shyama Prasad Mukharji, an orthodox Brahmin²⁶ and founder of right-wing Hindu nationalist political party Jan Sangh, as the President of Mahabodhi suspecting his low commitment to Buddhist ideal of justice (Sangharakshita, 1986, p. 18). For the same reason, Ambedkar argued for the exclusion of Brahmins from the positions of power in the Buddhist movement, “It is quite possible that if the Brahmins are allowed to lead the movement of the revival of Buddhism they may use their power to sabotage it or misdirect it. The precaution to exclude them from the position of power at least in the early stages of our movement is therefore very necessary” (Volume 17, Part 2 of B.R. Ambedkar, 1979-2009b, p. 511).²⁷ It is this social (caste) composition of Ambedkarite Buddhists who had high stakes in restructuring the society that was motivating them for increased participation in the social justice movement as has been argued by Harris and Cavendish in the case of Blacks in the civil rights movement.

Hypothesis 4: Continuation of caste-based oppression creates political opportunity (or more appropriately a threat) resulting in mobilization of organizational and cognitive resources for the social justice movement.

Even if we agree that all conditions present in the previous three hypotheses are present, one might speculate that participation of Ambedkarite Buddhists might have been less if the caste-based oppression of Buddhists themselves or of non-Buddhist victims of castes had not continued, as they would not have any reason to agitate about. Despite the Constitution of India outlawing it

²⁵ The oldest Buddhist organization in modern history founded by Anagarika Dharmapala (Srilankan) and Edwin Arnold (British) in 1891.

²⁶ This was not surprising for the reason that only in 2008 Mahabodhi Society of India brought a rule that only born Buddhists are eligible to become its president and vice president. Members of the society are drawn from all over the world including Hindus, Muslims, and Christians and very few of them are Ambedkarite (Neo) Buddhists. For more, see <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/Now-Hindus-cant-head-Mahabodhi-Society/articleshow/3535612.cms> last accessed on October 18, 2020.

²⁷ Ambedkar’s speech *Buddhist Movement in India: A blueprint* on December 04, 1954.

in 1949, caste-based oppression still continues as detailed for example in the reports *Hidden apartheid: Caste discrimination against India's untouchables* (Human Rights Watch and Center for Human Rights and Global Justice, 2007) or *Blocked by caste: Economic discrimination in modern India* (Thorat & Newman, 2010). The continuation of caste-based oppression is also evident from the official report on the atrocities committed on the Scheduled Castes (about 4 % of which are Ambedkarite Buddhists) and Scheduled Tribes titled *Crime in India* (Volume II, Chapters 7A, B, C, D)²⁸ brought by the federal government of India every year. The external oppression of Ambedkarite Buddhists themselves or of other fellow victims of the castes thus continues to provide an opportunity (or more appropriately a threat) for Ambedkarite Buddhists to rally around the issue of justice. In fact, due to continued oppression, a major revolt of victims of caste in Maharashtra took place in the 1970s in which Ambedkarite Buddhists played a key role and two major social movement organizations were founded around this time: Dalit Panthers in 1972 (Contursi, 1993) and BAMCEF in 1978 (Kumar, 2006). The absence of oppressive action also could partly explain why non-Ambedkarite Buddhists or other religious groups from non-victims of caste do not work (or react) so passionately for the anti-caste social justice movement.

7. Conclusion

Ambedkarite Buddhists play a very crucial role in the social justice movement without compromising secular foundations of the Indian constitution and in the times when non-peaceful means are being resorted to by aggrieved communities, Ambedkarite Buddhists can provide a model to other oppressed groups to create just and peaceful society. As I have narrated based on my own experience in the field of Buddhist and anti-caste movement, Ambedkarite Buddhists' contribution is multifaceted and disproportionately higher as compared to their population. Proper empirical studies are required to ascertain if this is really true. We also need empirical studies to explain why they play this role. Drawing on the experience of the Black Church in the Civil Rights Movement in the US, I tried to put forward four hypotheses. In my opinion, Ambedkarite Buddhists participate more actively in the social justice movement because Buddhist beliefs supporting social justice movement provide *cognitive and emotional resources*, Ambedkar framed *the socio-political canvas* and his work laid the foundation for *organizational resources*, caste composition of Buddhists creates group consciousness and continued caste-based oppression provides them a *reason (or opportunity/threat)* to participate. As studied by scholars in the case of the US, I believe every dimension of participation of Ambedkarite Buddhists and every hypothesis I have discussed, is amenable to empirical research. My exploratory study gives an insight into how the *interaction of non-religious thought (Ambedkar's in this case) with religious thought (Buddhist in this case)* can be used as a theoretical frame to analyze or even to predict the role of religious actors in the propagation of social justice in India. Taking this line of thinking further,

²⁸ For example, see the latest report here: <https://ncrb.gov.in/sites/default/files/CII%202019%20Volume%202.pdf> last accessed on October 19, 2020.

future research can also focus on comparative studies of participation of different religious groups in India subscribing to Ambedkarite (and other anti-caste) and non-Ambedkarite ideologies, thus increasing the validity of the findings.

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