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# Transnational Advocacy and the Dalit Rights Movement:

## Secular versus Religious Social Justice Narratives of Assertion on the Frontlines of Global Community

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# **Transnational Advocacy and the Dalit Rights Movement: Secular versus Religious Social Justice Narratives of Assertion on the Frontlines of Global Community**

By Jeremy Rinker

**Abstract:** *While there has been open debate among dalit social reformers on the Indian sub-continent over the use of religious conversion as a form of rights expression, many dalit leaders in North America remain uneasy with frames of social justice aligned with religion in any way. This paper aims to explore the dialectic between secular and religious frames apparent among dalit activists in India and North America. By interviewing and observing both dalit Diaspora leaders, who are organizing and mobilizing to actualize social justice for dalits back home, and Indian dalits that are actively agitating against the state, this research explores the contentious narrative structures deployed by these dalit activists and the role religious ideology plays in their contention.*

*Given the July 24, 2007 passage by the 110th U.S. Congress of Concurrent Resolution 139, which urges U.S. citizens working in India to “avoid discrimination towards the dalits in all business interactions” (H. Con. Res. 139, 7), there is a need to more deeply analyze the dalit Diaspora’s mobilization against, and framing of, dalit discrimination. What are the secular and religious narratives that dalit leaders are employing as they mobilize to create and/or support social justice on the sub-continent? How do these narratives compare to those of dalit activists on the sub-continent and what are each of these narrative structures based upon - - Eurocentric conceptions of Human Rights; Eastern rather than Western conceptions of what it means to be religious; a common identity based on like-experiences of injustice; or something else entirely? Addressing these questions, this research aims at a deeper understanding of the meaning and significance of dalit transnational advocacy. The fact is that, the frames utilized in the transnational mobilization of dalits take on a contextual character that is quite different from the character of mobilization within the sub-continent. Asking what role the secular and religious frames of social justice play in positioning dalit activists for social contention, this paper will provide insight into the importance of critically analyzing these frames in attempting to both better understand dalit contention and actualize its potential upon the backdrop of an increasingly globally-focused world society.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

*October 2, 2006:* The tension and excitement were palpable. Thousands of blue bandana-wearing youth shouted and waved their fists towards the sky from atop buses, rooftops, and the numerous teetering light-posts that dotted the divided thoroughfare. Crowds of revelers lined the street leading to the main entrance of the giant stupa<sup>1</sup>-like

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<sup>1</sup> In Buddhist history, stupas were originally burial mounds that housed, under the earth, Buddhist relics, which pilgrims circumambulated and monks painstakingly maintained. Gradually stupas were constructed as round, mound-shaped dome structures that could be entered and in which relics were placed in the center. Ambedkar’s Dikshabhumi (conversion) site is a domed facility with relics of Ambedkar in the middle.

structure that marked the spot in Nagpur City where in October of 1956 Dr. B.R. Ambedkar led one of human history's largest mass religious conversion ceremonies. Like much in India, this celebratory atmosphere, in which people seemed to fill every crevice of available space, attacked all the senses. It was clear that many of the revelers were happy to be there—not simply to revere Ambedkar or his embrace of Buddhism, but to show that they existed; that they had a distinctly new identity; and that they could not be simply disregarded and de-legitimized. Yet, it was also clear that this was a religious pilgrimage for many—a show of support for the deified bodhisattva (enlightened being) Ambedkar and his important embrace of a socially engaged Buddhism aimed at the betterment of dalits (literally the 'downtrodden' of society). From an outsider's perspective the excitement and revelry of the crowd was only eclipsed by a veneer of social conflict. Across from the Dikshabhumi (Ambedkar's conversion site) was a different kind of reveler, because October 2, 2006 was also the confluence of the start of a major Hindu festival, Divali and a national holiday, Gandhi Jayanti. While the tension between Ambedkar supporters and either those celebrating the beginning of Divali, or those celebrating the birth anniversary of M.K. Gandhi, could have easily risen to a level of violence, it did not on this auspicious day in Nagpur. The sacredness of the religious experience of a pilgrimage to Dikshabhumi seemed to trump secular disagreements that Ambedkar dalits in the crowd would surely share with their Hindu counterparts and/or supporters of Gandhi. This distinctly religious framing of an Ambedkar Buddhist identity, and interconnection of it with the social problematic of the caste system<sup>2</sup> fits the Indian socio-political context well – a context where such distinctions are rarely made. But the absence of secular political voices in this crowd was stark, with religion holding all answers. Even to those shouting, blue bandana-wearing, youth, Buddhist flags and religious ritual seemed to hold sway over secular speeches or public signs of dalit organization and mobilization.

*June 7, 2007:* Cut to a hotel room in Sterling, Virginia, not far from Dulles International Airport. Seven dalit professionals conduct a meeting of a newly formed organization called DANRIA, converting a vacant fifth-floor hotel suite into a makeshift meeting space. DANRIA, The Dr. Ambedkar Non-Resident Indian Association, is a confederation of dalit Diaspora professionals that has just recently registered as a local NGO in Maryland. They are seeking to collaborate with others to bring development to dalit communities in India. On this day they are meeting with a representative of the International Association for the Advancement of Dalits (IAAD) to plan for a proposed upcoming symposium on dalits to be held in Washington, D.C. This organization of Diaspora dalits is comprised of a neurosurgeon, a NASA scientist, The CEO and Founder of a Chain of Car Repair shops, an IT professional, and a number of academics from various theoretical disciplines. These are first-generation Indian Americans from all over

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<sup>2</sup> The definition of 'caste' is one that is multi-faceted and contentious, but an important concept to define nonetheless. The term was probably first used by the Portuguese settlers in 1563 on the Northwestern Indian coast to describe the economic associations of the Indian people that they encountered. As Hutton writes: "The truth is that while a caste is a social unit in a quasi-organic system of society, and throughout India is considered enough to be immediately identifiable, the nature of the unit is variable enough to make a concise definition difficult. If it be enough to define the system, the following formula is suggested – 'a caste system is one whereby a society is divided up into a number of self-contained and completely segregated units (castes), the mutual relations between which are ritually determined in a graded scale'" (1946, 50).

India, yet they share the common identity as dalit. Such an identity shares similar narratives of caste discrimination, but not necessarily similar religious foundations or ideologies, which gives the group its fiercely secular character. While the idea of the “promotion of shared values” does come up during the meeting, these shared values are framed as strictly secular, underlining simply that each human has rights to pursue, whether vaguely articulated or not, a shared sense values. One member even takes the opportunity to remind the inter-religious membership that DANRIA is a “strictly secular” organization and that he will leave if this reality changes. While there is an implicit knowledge of the dalit Sikh, Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian conversion movements in modern India among these DANRIA members, each of these movements’ sacred import is clearly perceived as a secondary to the goal of dalit liberation or dalit human rights, which is broadly defined and seen as at hand. In other words, the need for a secular frame of human rights takes precedence, and provides a perceived legitimacy to these professionals’ framing of dalit oppression. This strictly secular identity is seen as evolved from communal-based religious ideologies and, in turn, as a more effective vehicle for social change.

The two brief pictures painted above operate within the overlapping worldview of a larger Ambedkarite community.<sup>3</sup> They represent the tendency among Ambedkar followers to make prescient either a religious or a secular narrative structure for achieving social justice, and then to highlight those aspects of Ambedkar’s career and thinking which support this narrative structure. Neither is less legitimate than the other, but both problematize social justice in different ways, and thus articulate its desired advent differently. The religious narrative structure stresses the pious individual as a model for building a new community, while the secular emphasizes the individual’s rights as the basis for modernizing dalit community. These different narrative structures can be seen best in the distinction between two meaningful words that have gained widespread usage among former ‘untouchables’ – ‘dalit’ (downtrodden) versus ‘bahujan’ (deprived majority).<sup>4</sup>

While divergent narrative structures—which tend towards either more religious or more secular expressions—lead to different ideal conceptions of the socially just society, they also complicate movements’ attempts to mobilize for activism.

Scholars have been inattentive to these varying conceptions of social justice because frequently a community of speakers does not have a clearly-defined notion, and/or lacks the consensus or ability to express their projective vision of such an ideal concept as justice. However, what is most startling is that social actors are disempowered by such narrative confusion or hesitancy, not that they simply cannot articulate their confusion. Social mobilization scholars often ignore the importance between either

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix A for a basic schematic of this overlapping worldview within the Ambedkar and dalit rights movements studied herein. Appendix C gives a brief overview of the three specific movements compared in this paper: the Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha, Sahayak Gana (TBMSG), The Dr. Ambedkar Non-Resident Indian Association (DANRIA), and the International Commission for Dalit Rights (ICDR).

<sup>4</sup> Both these frames have operated alongside each other, but also represent two divergent tendencies within Indian minority rights movements. Both terms have been used to galvanize movements – the Dalit Panthers and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), each with quite different goals, tactics, and social justice expressions, but invariably linked as expressions of low-caste assertion (one through cultural, the other through political power).

secular or religious narrative frames.<sup>5</sup> To see justice from a multifaceted perspective—both one based on ensuring the realization of equity or balance and the other based on the creative possibilities which underpin any state of justice—requires a broad projective outlook. While many social movement theorists argue this difference focuses on movement's ideals and not what is 'real' or seen to be objectively understandable, the fact is to some social movements, such as those created by Ambedkar Buddhists, the religious narrative is all that they see as really real. Of course, in the practice of movement dynamics, like other social science phenomenon, the real and the ideal often become blurred. The result is that Ambedkar's followers proceed unawares of the fine implications of the divergent narrative structures they deploy.

Another important scholarly critique of such a secular-religious distinction comes from post-colonial theorists. Despite the fact that "the ultimate aim of postcolonial theories is to feed into some form of social activism for a more egalitarian society," (Abraham, 2007:4) such theories tend to deconstruct case study and theory-building about post-colonial social movements as 'always-already' lodged in Western hegemonic leaning and constructs. Thus, the post-colonial critique of drawing conclusions based on the pictures painted above argues that such dialectic constructs as secular and religious are Western and therefore value-laden with imperialist and/or individualistic homogenization of experience. Though such critique is valuable in questioning bias and presumptions, from a pragmatic perspective it hinders a movement's self-reflective and emancipatory potential. Ambedkarite social justice movements for the eradication of caste discrimination must overcome this post-colonial tendency in order to develop a pragmatic conception of social justice.

Despite a few attempts to point out the lack of a clearly defined notion of justice in social movements,<sup>6</sup> few scholars have chosen to address the sticky business of understanding movements' efforts at conceptualizing social justice, or more broadly their own conceptions in relation to human rights. The scholarly dearth of research into social movements' social justice conceptions underscores both the complexity of defining justice, and, until recently, a sense that global interrelations were unimportant or unquantifiable. In the case of Dalit rights, as activists have attempted to actualize their social justice conceptions which were previously blocked by their government, what Keck and Sikkink call a "boomerang pattern" gets created in which activists attempt to circumvent traditional channels by developing transnational ties and strategies (1998: 12). The global resources afforded by modernity have allowed new means to achieve social justice. But, do these new means portend new ends? My own study of Ambedkar Buddhists has shown that religiously-based social actors have been slow to realize these new ends Rinker (2009).

As Ganguly (2005) has argued, what is needed to understand the caste system's encounter with modernity is an ability to "scrutinize hegemonic knowledge formations that frame our outlook on the world and tell most of us in South Asia that the caste system smacks of times past and is ingloriously retrogressive." (Ganguly, 2005:3). To

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<sup>5</sup> See for example Zald's (1996) focus on culture with scant reference to religion and McAdam's (1996) focus on strategy and tactics in the American civil rights, which also fails to adequately discuss religious ideology as the prevailing factor in the movement. For a different perspective on the civil rights movement and the role that religion plays see Swarts (2008).

<sup>6</sup> See for example Rajagopal (2003) and Keck and Sikkink (1998).

understand the recent proliferation of transnational dalit rights discourse, understanding movement narrative structures is a mandatory precursor. While religious-based movements for dalit rights, like their secular big brother before them, have begun to develop transnational linkages in recent years, social actors projecting religious-based narrative structures have had to work harder than their secular counterparts to tailor frame their message for specific audiences and supporters, both secular and religious. This becomes especially evident within an increasingly global environment in which justice concerns are no longer local. The modernist disdain for religion that is seen as traditionalist and identity-forming continues to be challenged in the marketplace of ideas, and in a spiritually inclined society, like India, the modernist thinking is loosing. In such context, religion is understood for its instrumental and communal nature, which makes an outwardly religious narrative of individual attainment helpful in forging local community (a bahujan or deprived community), but also makes it more difficult to the success of a national or international movement (of dalit rights as individual rights). In India, the challenge to modernist ideas has been both successful and unwieldy—witness respectively the rise of the Hindutva politics of the 1990s; and the point counter-point and social contention over various anti-conversion laws.<sup>7</sup> In the U.S. and the West, however, this challenge to modernism receives less traction, as for rational individualist westerners, religious frames of social justice seem more problematic. Such secular-religious dialectic cries for further analysis as global attempts to empower the voiceless gain strength and inclusive versus exclusive narratives of justice compete for both consumers and beneficiaries. Despite the confusion it is apparent that both religious-based and strictly secular movements have something to learn from each other and the narratives they deploy (a point explored further below).

Using narrative analysis methods to analyze the secular and religious narrative structures that dalit leaders employ, this research draws out the implications of the worldview frames of dalit activists from a multi-disciplinary conflict theory perspective. While this paper extrapolates a narrative theory from exemplary cases of only three social movements narratives (one dalit and two Ambedkarite) it does point to the centrality of narrative structures to social justice conceptions and foregrounds possible strategies and tactics of contention. The prevalent narrative apparent in the narrative structure of religiously-based movements focuses on overcoming victimization through the reclamation of one's identity upon conversion. This assumes a responsibility for action, which resides intrinsically within each individual. The opposite and secular narrative, by focusing on the re-humanization of past victims, assumes there is a need to push the collective mentality to a tipping-point in which a rights regime can be adequately enforced. Highlighting the lack of analysis of this dialectic between religious and secular narratives of social justice within the Ambedkar movement, this research aims to develop a sense of shared values between those inclined towards particularly strict versions of these two opposing worldviews. Based on preliminary fieldwork such shared values do not yet exist, or at best only exist in small pockets of dalit activism and coordination.

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<sup>7</sup> The ultimate example of the proof of a social constructionist epistemology can be seen in regard to the modern movement toward 're-conversion' to Hinduism (as the majority faith). High-caste activists' re-construction of Hinduism as a voluntary religion flies in the face of tradition and, in fact, flies in the face of many who simultaneously support a right-wing Hindutva (hindu-ness) ideology of upholding tradition.

By privileging such shared values both a better understanding of dalit contention and a fulfillment of dalit rights movements' potential with best be achieved.

## HISTORY OF DALIT ACTIVISM IN INDIA

The word dalit means broken or downtrodden in Sanskrit and was “used as far back as 1931 in journalistic writing” (Michael, 1999: 99). Popularized by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in the 1920s and 30s, and later by the Dalit Panthers movement in the 1970s, the term became a new secular identity for millions of those formerly known as ‘untouchables’ in India. Today, modern dalit identity is in a discursive competition with various religious identities for control of between one-fourth and one-fifth of India’s billion-person population, which is classified as scheduled caste (SC).<sup>8</sup> The life and thought of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the father of dalit rights and assertion, as well as the modern Indian constitution, was foundational to this discursive competition, which can be clearly seen in the following quote from Gangadar Pantawane, the founding editor of of *Asmitadarsh*, a journal devoted to dalit literature:

To me Dalit is not a caste. He is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of this country. He does not believe in God, Rebirth, Soul, Holy Books teaching separatism, Fate and Heaven because they have made him a slave. He does believe in humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution (Ganguly. 2005:132).

Compared to the rhetorical calls by Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha, Sahayak Gana (TBMSG) activists to work towards a time when “all India will be Buddhist,”<sup>9</sup> the above quote provides a stark secular-focused contrast to Indian social activists’ penchant for citing religious ideals in order to galvanize the identity of followers. Pantawane’s conception privileges dalit as symbolic of a post-modern identity in which caste distinctions have become irrelevant.

Yet, it was the life and legacy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar that laid the foundation for this competition to win the hearts and minds of dalits. As both a social reformer from within the government, and then later a cultural reformer from the outside, Dr. Ambedkar’s life itself represented a balancing between these two, not incompatible, identities. While many people outside the Indian sub-continent are familiar with Mahatma Gandhi, few who live outside of India know much about Dr. Ambedkar, or about the movement he helped spawn. Both his political significance as the foremost representative of the Mahar ‘untouchable’ community in Maharashtra, and the religious importance he played in changing the social identity and spiritual commitments of that

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<sup>8</sup> SC is the government’s terminology for former ‘untouchables’ and is understood as separate from other oppressed groups which the government calls either scheduled tribes (ST) or other backward castes (OBCs). STs and OBCs comprise of various depressed tribal communities which vary according to region. It should also be noted here that many of those who consider themselves ‘dalit’ are very vocal against Gandhi’s use of the term ‘harijan’ (literally ‘Children of god’) to describe them. It seems that rolled-up in many people’s understanding of the term ‘dalit’ is a deep sense of secular humanism. This is partly why the use of the term dalit Buddhism post-Ambedkar’s conversion becomes so problematic.

<sup>9</sup> This phrase was used by many speakers and panelists at the TBMSG sponsored “Dr. Ambedkar and Developments in the Modern Buddhist World: Network Conference of Buddhist Activists” at Nagaloka, Nagpur, India, September 29-October 4, 2006.

particular community of dalits through a revival of Buddhism, are unrivaled throughout India's long historical development. Ambedkar's prolific legacy culminating in his chairmanship of the drafting of the Indian constitution, as well as his call to all former 'untouchables' to convert to Buddhism has made his continued influence among scheduled castes unrivaled. Though his life narrative is so compelling that Indians of all persuasions have appropriated his image, like other low-caste social reformers, both before and after him, Dr. Ambedkar struggled to create intra-caste bonds; bonds that were lacking even among the lowest of caste groupings who were divided and aggrieved.

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956),<sup>10</sup> affectionately known by his followers as Babasaheb, overcame the cultural and economic impasses of being born an 'untouchable' Mahar, one of three lowest-caste segments of Maharashtra society, in late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Hindu-dominated India. Breaking through countless stereotypes, Ambedkar was taught early of the importance of education, and he used the social cleavages that the British administrative policy provided to transcend his socially prescribed role. Rising to the post of Law Minister in Nehru's first independent Indian cabinet, he was appointed chairman of the drafting committee for the new constitution. From this vantage point, Ambedkar was well-placed to destroy the legal foundations of the caste system, and in 1948 Ambedkar presented his draft of the Indian constitution, which was accepted a year later. In it can be seen Ambedkar's push to get social change codified legalistically. This part of Ambedkar's legacy culminates in Article 17 of the Indian Constitution, which states:

'Untouchability' is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of 'untouchability' shall be an offense punishable in accordance with the law (Ling, 1980: 88-89).

But despite this important legal success, Dr. Ambedkar slowly began to realize that structural reform was only one means to his larger goal of social change in India. Increasingly frustrated that change was not coming to his people fast enough, he began to believe that social revolution was necessary, which could come only from actively critiquing the cultural structure of Hinduism, as opposed to attempting to change it from within. Similar to later conflict resolution scholars, the trailblazing Ambedkar seemed to ask: "Will we contribute to harmony through conflict resolution, but do so at the cost of accepting the continuation of some injustice? Or should we pursue justice for a particular group, knowing that this pursuit may increase conflict rather than resolve it?" (Hubbard, 1999: 276). Gradually coming to believe the answer to these questions was a resounding commitment to pursue justice, Dr. Ambedkar began to focus more on societal rather than structural change. By organizing political parties, educating low-caste people, and agitating for change, Dr. Ambedkar pursued broad based change by re-conceiving the meaning of justice in society, not only its structures, but also its social realities.

Ambedkar's identity evolved throughout his life to one of social activist, and the evolution of his growth and thought can be seen clearly in his prolific writings.<sup>11</sup> During

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix B for a timeline of the important events in Dr. Ambedkar's life.

<sup>11</sup> For a complete list of his writings see Rodriguez's (2002) bibliography and the 16 Volumes entitled Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches edited by Vasant Moon and brought out by the Government of Maharashtra (1979-98).

the latter part of his career, Ambedkar increasingly began to see religion as a valuable means to realize change through socio-cultural critique. As an answer to his discontent with the structural violence imposed by the caste system, religion provided a vehicle to restructure social discourse and remake the foundational values of the social system—two important aims of legions of young dalit activists. It was also with a life-long desire to understand religion that Ambedkar conditioned his analysis of caste. Thus, by 1935, Ambedkar had decided that Hinduism was the root cause of the ‘untouchable’ problem and had resolved to change his religion as a result. This, he believed, was the best solution for the Mahar ‘untouchables’ that he now led. Encouraging other ‘untouchables’ to join this cause,

If you want to gain self-respect, change your religion.  
If you want to create a cooperative society, change your religion.  
If you want power, change your religion.  
If you want equality, change your religion.  
If you want independence, change your religion.  
If you want to make the world in which you live happy, change your religion (Queen, 1996: 51).<sup>12</sup>

But Ambedkar saw religion as a social vehicle as much as others saw it for its soteriological commitments to explain life. For Ambedkar choice of religions was a means to social change in the present. By changing religious traditions he, as well as each individual, could change society. Thus, he waged a polemical and rhetorical war against Hinduism.<sup>13</sup> Declaring Hinduism the root cause of dalit suffering Ambedkar challenged the orthodox beliefs of Indian culture head on, and was either reviled or loved for this audacity. These acts created support, criticism and fierce debate. Gandhi, upon hearing Ambedkar speak, was once said to have remarked, “religion is not like a horse or a cloak, which can be changed at will. It is a more integral part of one’s self than one’s own body” (Queen, 1996: 51).

Yet, while Gandhi criticized the idea of a choice in religion, Ambedkar studied all the world’s faiths in order to find the one, which would best fit his ‘untouchable’ communities’ needs. The act of choosing his religion was, for Ambedkar, the cement of a re-positioned identity which was both personal and collective. As the answer to many of the needs of his ‘untouchable’ community, it was an act of social protest and self-help rolled into one. If his more outwardly social protests brought spite from Brahmins, his re-positioned identity as a Buddhist would bring him deification among his own ‘untouchable’ community—something he himself was said to be uncomfortable with. On October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1956, on the 2500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Buddha’s Nirvana, Ambedkar led a mass conversion of ‘untouchable’ Hindus to Buddhism.<sup>14</sup> This was the culminating act

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<sup>12</sup> This is a quote from Ambedkar’s speech at Yeola, Nagpur in 1935—the same speech in which he promised that though he was born a Hindu, he would not die one. This speech sparked intense debate both within and outside the ‘untouchable’ community.

<sup>13</sup> Probably his most reviled act was his infamous burning of a copy of the revered Hindu guide to social order, the *Manusmriti*. This act brought spite from both high-caste conservative and reform-minded Hindus alike, and with it Ambedkar became increasingly seen as radical and dangerous.

<sup>14</sup> “Approximately 380,000 ‘untouchables’ took part in the outdoor ceremony” (Queen, 1996: 54). Indeed scholars disagree as to the actual size of this event, but most agree that it is probably the largest mass

of his now re-positioned identity and in writing his own vows upon taking refuge Ambedkar ensured that he had created what some religious scholars have since called “neo-Buddhism” (Queen, 1996). Through this re-positioned identity he legitimated a new social perspective and Buddhism happened to be a means to the end of creating a new worldview and social discourse. As the ultimate *upaya* (skillful means), Buddhism itself was to give new hope and confidence to thousands of dalits. However, as Ambedkar died only six months after his controversial conversion, it is not completely clear what form of institutionalization his Buddhism would have taken. He nonetheless ignited a revitalization of Buddhism on the Indian sub-continent, inspiring many a social activist, and living up to his promise to not die a Hindu.

The above leadership narrative provides a common grounding for both secular and religiously inclined dalit rights activists. Yet, depending on the specifics of the story that is emphasized, one can see divergences in social movement organization. Two thousand plus years of caste discrimination has left a void in dalits’ collective cultural identity, which Ambedkar attempted to fill. At the same time, future activists will continue to argue as to which void Ambedkar’s narrative fills—a clarion call for secular rights or a human need for ultimate meaning? As Taylor, Bougie, and Caouette have argued, lack of a collective cultural identity is the most socially damaging and difficult to overcome aspect of a group’s identity. It seems that Ambedkar’s emphasis on the role of religion in society is an implicit acknowledgement of this argument and an attempt to reconstruct a new version of this collective cultural identity. The role of cultural collective identity is not merely for group members to have a shared cultural history. As we have argued, it is a stable reference group against which the individual engages positioning processes on an ongoing basis in order to develop a healthy personal identity (2003: 213).

Ambedkar was a pragmatist, studying under John Dewey at Columbia University, eager to develop a healthy collective cultural identity for those he considered his people—the downtrodden of society. Religious narrative structures were used as a vehicle to attempt to re-deploy a self-aware collective cultural identity. But his use of both secular and religious narrative structure as a means is telling. Ambedkar had a modern understanding of religion, which emphasized that belief was not only about ends, but also a means of social interpretation. He saw the wisdom of approaching social conflict from a position, which privileges neither simply religious nor secular explanations. Unfortunately, Ambedkar’s Buddhist followers have failed to openly and fully explore the social and political resources of both the secular and religious narratives they have at their disposal. Despite the fact that Ambedkar dalit activists’ discourse seems to strategically use one or the other these narrative structure—religious or secular—to support their cause and build support, an analysis of the social positions that each creates has been lacking. Secular attempts to focus on Ambedkar’s injunction to “educate, organize, agitate”<sup>15</sup> have failed to see the added value that creating a new religious identity can bring to oppressed groups’ aspirations, not to mention the added value religious institutions bring to attempts at mass mobilization. Similarly, religiously inclined converts to Buddhism have failed to realize that their religious rhetoric can be exclusionary. Though preaching an inclusive and voluntary belief system, converted

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religious conversion in human history. Some have estimated that as many as 800,000 ‘untouchables’ converted to Buddhism that day.

<sup>15</sup> Ambedkar often ended his most impassioned speeches with this phrase.

dalits often fail to realize their emphasis on religious-based explanation sidelines broad-based rights-based opportunities for mobilization.<sup>16</sup> Further, each side of this spectrum of activism has seen the other side as problematic for maintaining their own base of support within the dalit community. In other words, followers of Ambedkar's religious narrative see secular rights talk as problematic since it relies too much on outside notions of liberty, democracy, fraternity, and agency while followers of Ambedkar's secular narrative see religious rhetoric as backward and pre-modern. In order to bridge these two narratives within the dalit rights movement their foundation, structures, and expressions have to be further explored and dissected, as both narratives provide important resources, which have the reach and impact all dalit activists desire.

### SECULAR VERSUS RELIGIOUS ACTIVIST NARRATIVES

The religious narratives of dalit assertion focus on leaving the Hindu-fold, which is seen as the root cause of the dalit social condition. In doing so, the individual re-asserts him/her self and re-positions their identity as coming from a religiously converted worldview, as opposed to coming from a certain caste which is seen as a partitioning of society that has been too long sanctified by the hierarchical system now called Hinduism. As such, the religious framework of conversion as a means to social justice fosters a sort of dualistic identity among dalits by empowering dalits not only as newly self-reliant through the experience of conversion, but also as one that has been victimized in an all too recent past. As Sen reminds us "the adversity of exclusion can be made to go hand in hand with the gifts of inclusion" (2006: 3), but this fact should not deter us from seeing that the complexity of identity highlights the difficulty inherent in mobilizing people around "identity justice" (Rothbart and Korostolina, 2007). In particular, the combination of liberation and victimization is problematic for mobilizing widespread international support. Conversion as the living out of theology's connection to praxis does not have the same universal appeal as a narrative structure which equates dalit rights with human rights. Despite a new identity as Buddhist—or Sikh or Christian—the converted dalit cannot completely divorce him/her self from the psychological legacy and mobilizing power of past experiences of injustice. This dual identity has both advantages and disadvantages for newly converted dalits as they attempt to achieve social justice. Ever cognizant of which identity to engage when, Dalit Buddhist followers of Dr. Ambedkar must navigate an array of dalit aspirations by balancing secular pragmatism with the desire to create a religious community based on Buddhist values.

The secular frame of social justice, by comparison, presents a more unified conception of dalit identity as first and foremost human. While this more materialist perspective on social justice places Dr. B.R. Ambedkar near the end of a long line of important low-caste social thinkers, it also downplays any religious proclivities as subordinate to secular humanism. Simultaneously, this secular frame presents a belief that the problems of dalits can only be cured with the help of the unified action of outside intervention, advocacy, and political agitation, taking the onus for change off the individual and placing it on the collective. From this view, the root causes of a lack of

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<sup>16</sup> Kantowsky (2003) outlines some interesting and related research findings that show that dalit converts to Buddhism do not tend to change their caste-based habits simply because they have converted.

social justice, as contextual and unchangeable by any one individual, are confused by any attempt to focus attention on any sacred ultimate. It is as if religious commitments appear as anathema to those strict adherents of the secular rights frame. It is therefore, assumed from this secular perspective that the root causes of a lack of social justice must be approached from a religiously neutral position of secular re-humanization of the oppressed. As a consequence the concepts of reconciliation and healing are often overlooked by these secular humanists in a rush to realize the equitable society. In addition, the secular activists adherents' post-enlightenment aversion to religious discourse seems to run counter to the local cultural norms and history. Religion as a constituent part of the South Asian historical and cultural milieu is de-emphasized in favor of a perspective of global interdependence.

### **SECULAR NARRATIVE OF DALIT ACTIVISM: THE CREATION OF A TRANSNATIONAL VOICE**

The secular narrative and social position of dalits as oppressed victim predominates among dalit social actors partly because of the slow, but steady, success of this narrative structure's ability to build transnational support and advocacy networks. Bob argues convincingly that "organizing" and "rhetorical" changes among dalit activists led to increased success of a dalit rights as human rights frame of contention in the late 1990s (2007). But what has this increased reliance on a narrative structure of victimization cost the dalit rights cause? As Polletta explicitly argues: while "personal stories chip away at the public indifference" and "elicit sympathy on the part of the powerful," it is also evident that "narrative comes with risks as well as benefits" (2006: 2-3). While the secular narrative structure has allowed activists to conflate dalit rights with human rights, it has also disempowered many religiously inclined dalits through its aversion to religious language and frames. Further, since transnational advocacy often does not respond effectively to local needs, many disenfranchised dalits are turned off by a secular approach to organizing that sees personal belief systems as irrelevant to mobilization success. In short, there is a cultural divide between Western post-enlightenment rights thinking and traditional thoughts rooted in local contexts that value ritualistic and institutional expressions of culture.

This is not to say that the dialectic between secular versus religious narratives can be explained simply by arguing that a post-colonial clash of civilizations or cultures is either the genesis of the divergence, or the solution to unifying these different worldviews. Rather, noticing this cultural divide does signal the risky footing one stands on if advocating either a strongly secular narrative structure to combat caste or a strongly religious one. As Ganguly concisely puts it: "The modernizing desire to first reify caste as a relic of times past, and then to annihilate it, is truly alive and well" (2005: 237). This secular bias away from the traditional is neither the best nor most effective way to create social change. Instead, it often leads to sensational excitement outside of India, while faltering in the local context. The bias among secular dalit rights organizations, which disregard the conversion perspective so prevalent among Indian Ambedkarite Buddhists, serves as a case in point. During the recent, and first ever in the United States, Dalit Studies conference, an academic panel on the "Paradox of Religion" failed to raise this

issue of religion's relation to traditional manners of thought, much less address the dalit rights movement from a perspective that privileges religious conversion as a crucial factor in the identity of low-caste groups.<sup>17</sup> Beyond the academic community, however, a secular rights-based focus also creates a number of limitations and paradoxes for activists.

DANRIA, the organization portrayed in the second short vignette that began this piece provides a prime example of the dialectical problems that secular activists face in approaching their religiously-grounded counterparts. The DANRIA leaders desire to engage Ambedkar Buddhists, but within a frame of the strictly secular. At a DANRIA planning meeting in May 2007 Ambedkar Buddhist representatives from the TBMSG attempted to develop linkages with the work and resources of DANRIA members, and DANRIA members continually made it clear that their work was to support secular dalit education and empowerment. Partly due to how religion is understood in a post-reformation West, such interactions revolve around a judgment that equates support for religious-based organizations as support for the propagation of that religion. It is the old stigma of religious proselytization; no matter what good work an organization may be doing it must always be scrutinized upon the backdrop of its religious commitments and the assumed privileged priority of those commitments. In this dance of assumptions and commitments, Ambedkar Buddhists try to re-frame their contention to fit the desires of secular activists, while secular activists assume religious organizations' exclusive goals and under-estimate their ability and opportunities to mobilize.

Secular narrative structures of dalit contention present benefits to go along with the limitations, which they pose. They bring pragmatism to an often-disorganized array of activist decisions and goals. Through an unequivocal support for humanity and secular humanism these narrative structures provide grounding for international mobilization which bridges religious and cultural difference. The International Commission for Dalit Rights' (ICRD's) mission statement demonstrates this tendency to both symbolically and pragmatically bridge these aspects of difference within the dalit movement: "Eliminating rights-based human need and fulfilling freedom and democracy is necessary to achieve effective national and global development policies and programs, and to alleviate discrimination and extreme poverty."<sup>18</sup> Sufficiently secular such a statement allows for the possibility of religious responses to lack of freedom, discrimination and poverty. In place of a strong religious commitment, the secular narratives that such organizations profess, are often founded on an enduring faith in ideology. In interviewing Chadra Bhan Prasad, the only dalit writer for a major Indian weekly and a dalit rights activist who tends towards the secular end of the dalit movement's narrative structure, it was immediately evident that he was not even familiar with TBMSG, one of the major purveyors of the religious narrative of Ambedkar and dalit rights in Maharashtra. Though at first surprising, this observation seems more understandable given that Prasad, a native of Uttar Pradesh who is based in Delhi, is a strictly secular Ambedkarite who sees Ambedkar upon the backdrop of a Marxist analytical ideology of change. Now

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<sup>17</sup> Dalit Studies Conference, University of Pennsylvania, December 5, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.icdrforum.org/>

arguing that capitalism is the only thing that will save the dalit,<sup>19</sup> Prasad draws an interesting comparison to the Ambedkar Buddhist activists of the TBMSG who see the solution for dalits as coming through the dharma (Buddhist teaching).

This secular narrative structure implies that religious commitment can be sidelined in favor of an underlying, and more basic, commitment to humanism—an assumption, which runs deep in the dalit rights movement. One ICRD dalit activist even stated: “Despite the fact that many different dalit groups employ different strategies, our goal is the same.”<sup>20</sup> The idea that dalit activists’ deploy diverging strategies despite common goals posits not only that dalit activists have one collective identity, but also that this collective’s social justice concerns are all the same. Such broad assumptions, however, limit the effectiveness of dalit organizations by disempowering the potential to reflect on real difference.

### RELIGIOUS NARRATIVES AND DALIT ACTIVISM: ARE THEY RELIGIOUS OR DO THEY USE RELIGION AS AN IDENTITY WEDGE?

- (1) The religious-based narrative and social position of dalits as actualized adepts and citizens has limited religious-based ability to build transnational support and advocacy networks. The following narrative transcript<sup>21</sup> from a Dalit Buddhist activist leader of the TBMSG is telling of the frame acrobatiHe was opposed to any ideal system which was based on any scripture. [A]
- (2) [p] so he said that democracy has to be based on the individuals [A]
- (3) [p] that there should be equal respect in the society for all beings. [O]
- (4) And he gave a formula sort of thing [CA]
- (5) [p] He said that ‘One man, one value’ is the most important. [A]
- (6) Instead of we have a system where we have one man one vote, but more than that what is important is one man one value. [O]
- (7) And he promoted that form of system, from early on. [O]
- (8) And he had to fight very hard with the established elite Indians. [CA]
- (9) For example Gandhi who was adopted in the form of governance based on the Hindu scripture, kind of a very utopian and ideal form of society, which was based on the Hindu scriptures...[O]
- (10) [P] like Rama Raja, the kingdom of Rama [p] and that frightened the minorities in India, for example the Muslims. [E]
- (11) And... ahh... [p] like in that... ahh... particular concept of an ideal society there was a kind of... ahh... strong support for the caste system...[O]
- (12) [P] and another thing he noted is that there has to be a system, that there has to be a kind of... ahh...ahh... a method to secularize the society, [O]

<sup>19</sup> See the proceedings of “The Dalit Studies Conference,” organized and funded by the Center for the Advanced Study of India (CASI), University of Pennsylvania, December 5, 2008 and Wax, E. (*Washington Post*, August 31, 2008)

<sup>20</sup> BD Bishwakarma, Founder and President of the International Commission for Dalit Rights (ICDR) May 17, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> This transcript was taken during participant observation of a talk given by a movement leader named Mangesh. Letters identifying Labov’s (1972) six part structure of a fully formed narrative (i.e. Abstract, Orientation, Complicating Action, Evaluation, Result, and Coda) are provided in brackets after each transcribed line.

- (13) because the religious concept when they dominate the human mind they do not let to the...[E]
- (14) [P] like many a times [E]
- (15) [p] like what that happens in India is that people will have a deep belief system which they will not be ready to test in the light of the scientific methods...[E]
- (16) [P] So for example if there is... ahh... say for example a Test Tube Baby [O]
- (17) some innovation happening in the Western world [A]
- (18) Hindu maximalists, the Fundamentalist tradition, they will try to say that that particular innovation or discovery was already there [p] you know [p] with us... [E]
- (19) but if you poke further and ask for the method they will not have any...[E]
- (20) So it is like trying to take the scientific language in order to prove what is not there. [E]
- (21) So this kind of superstitious ideas [p] like at one point of time some Hindu Fundamentalists they will claim that the caste system is the best form of organizing the society [p] it is the *best* form [p] some people has to be lower, some people has to be... [CA]
- (22) [P] and they will then try to support this system in terms of the food chain [p] the big fish ate the small fish [p] kind of a very very crude form of social Darwinism... [CA]
- (23) [p] A very crude form of social Darwinism. [CA]
- (24) So we try to challenge those ideas, the ‘so-called’ religious ideas [R]
- (25) [p] which like kind of fit into the system and try to enslave the human mind. [E]
- (26) And Dr. Ambedkar was very keen on promoting the scientific culture in India...[O]
- (27) [p] like what’s the intellectual side of that [p] like how we can challenge the concepts that are detrimental to the growth of the human personality. [CA]
- (28) ...which are detrimental to growth of human society. [E]
- (29) That is one of his strategies and he started a political party in order to really... ahh... [p] ensure the similar political rights for the people who were classed as the ‘untouchables.’ [C]

Mangesh’s sincerity and commitment to social justice through building a peaceful community in which everyone has the ability to reach their potential, is not simply lip-service to a vague altruism—it is lived. His Buddhism is more humanistic than sectarian or scriptural; more philosophical than overtly spiritual. Yet, the inclusiveness of the TBMSG family of organizations is not simply an expression of pragmatism. The members who carry the mantle of the TBMSG movement are, first and foremost, believers in dharmadatu (all living beings’ possess the Buddha-nature), and this belief provides philosophical grounding for an egalitarian social prescription aimed at re-defining karma in the Indian society as scientific and not supernatural. As an Indian, but humanist above all else, Mangesh is representative of a young generation of modern Indians who are both newly curious about the world outside of India and armed with the means to explore it. Eager to integrate Western political ideals, such as rights discourse, with Eastern conceptions of the examined life, these modern Ambedkar Buddhist activists see themselves as “the fruit of the movement.” In other words, the beneficiaries of their parents’ conversion and insistence on following both, their father and mother’s example as well as Ambedkar’s call to education.

Mangesh believes full-heartedly that focusing on inner change is a priori to attempt at social justice and peace-building. Therefore, teachings of the practice of Buddhism are crucial to the community that he aims to assist. This is a rational, not spiritual belief and the Buddha—from the Ambedkar Buddhist perspective—provided

guiding principles to achieve inner change. Yet, this insistence on rationalism and pragmatism is where a certain bias threatens to stunt the full potential of the TBMSG movement. The symbolic use by movement members of ritual and stories can, and does, get lost when a rational problem-solving approach to the world is privileged (Schirch, 2001: 147). This is not to say that Mangesh's (or TBMSG's) commitment to social change is weak or even unjustified by experience, but rather that a combination of both inner and outer change can be problematic. Exclusively focusing on rational approaches to problems solving can limit TBMSG's ability to affect lasting change of the local level; while a focus on inner-change marginalizes strong believers in other religious and normative systems and simultaneously decelerates the pragmatic realization of TBMSG's wider social justice ideal. That sustainable social change can only come with inner-change may be a truism, but it also places limits on TBMSG appeal and deftness to claim secular support or argue for symbolic senses of meaning. This poses a number of pragmatic problems for the movement, illustrated by the re-constructed narratives above.

For one the narrative represents a normative assumption that rationality always explains moral justifications.<sup>22</sup> Mangesh's positioning of Ambedkar Buddhists as consistent believers in scientific processes—while exposing the rational assumptions involved in narrating justice—also acts as an attempt to justify a moral stance via delegitimizing the other. MacIntyre (1984) would label such a process as falling within “the When men and women identify what are in fact their partial and particular causes too easily and too completely with the cause of some universal principle, they usually behave worse than they would otherwise do.”<sup>23</sup>

In reference to this particular narrative, it is not presumed here that it engenders bad behavior among movement members, but rather that it misses an important realization of the potential for destructive behavior created by the identity it enforces. Positioning Ambedkar Buddhists as rational humanists and all Hindus as superstitious anti-rationalists only concerned with pleasing the gods, Mangesh is unconcerned with his own moral denigration of the other and the processes of positioning this type of delegitimization models to others.<sup>24</sup> Mangesh's ascription of un-scientific characteristics to others that are associated with under-education, or lack of intelligence, positions Ambedkar Buddhists as freed from the fear of superstition through education and Buddhist practice. This freedom is seen as liberating not only in the sense of being based on methodological reliability, but also in a sense creating an epistemological freedom. Furthermore, Mangesh's own relived experiences of this anti-rationalist thinking provide an emotional energy which legitimizes Mangesh's speech. Paying attention to the uses and processes of social positioning within Mangesh's attack on fundamentalist Hindus as superstitious provides a means to understand the TBMSG social justice narrative upon a spectrum of interconnected meanings.

Coming in the context of Mangesh's description of Ambedkar's sociological analysis of the caste system, this narrative transcription exhibits an opposition between rational and ideal conceptions which is immediately apparent in line one. Positioning

<sup>22</sup> See MacIntyre (1984) for a critique of this reasoning.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>24</sup> Despite the fact that this was an entirely American audience, I have since heard similar speech acts from Mangesh in talks which he believes aim at radicalizing people to the caste issues. Both foreigners and Indians have been present in such talks.

Ambedkar as opposed to any ideal (future) system based on scripture, Mangesh develops the image of Ambedkar as an egalitarian freedom fighter. The ideological other becomes the antithesis to actualizing liberty, fraternity, and equality. More than simply pejoratively categorizing mythical or idealistic social constructions, privileging the rational as normatively more valuable and as implicitly congruent with equality has the effect of positioning the superstitious as irrelevant and un-democratic.<sup>25</sup> Anti-rationalists are thereby equated with anti-democracy's proponents, while simple-minded ideologues are de-legitimized. Invoking Gandhi in line 9, Mangesh is drawing attention to the unacknowledged role of Ambedkar in the independence movement; yet at the same time branding Gandhi (and his supporters) as advocates of future aspirations ungrounded in reality. Such utterance implies that if these future aspirations are ungrounded in reality, then they are bound to produce unjust social relations and structures. By contrast, the TBMSG ideal is grounded in a scientific methodology, which is attainable from a pragmatic view. Unaware of the full spectrum of needs in society these Gandhians are utopian thinkers with little by way of concrete analysis and/or proscription for creating their utopia. In citing examples like Rama Raj (line 10) and test-tube babies (line 16) Mangesh is essentializing all Hindus as superstitious—equating Gandhi followers with Hindutva nationalists or extreme fundamentalists. Though subtle this positioning process is intentional. Creating a sense of us versus them such crude associations have the effect of reinforcing a TBMSG belief in social uplift through the personal empowerment of education and Buddhist practice. In the context of this speech act,<sup>26</sup> Mangesh is positioning himself and his movement as the original purveyors of Indian democracy and scientific rationalism. To an audience of foreigners, the Ambedkar Buddhist is positioned as providing a logical method for explaining the world and therefore proscribing change; while the Hindu is the cause of the stereotypical view of India as nonsensical and mystical, thus making them incapable of instituting equitable change. Nuanced and multi-faceted, Mangesh's narrative holds multiple levels of meaning, aspects which are often overlooked by both movement members and outsiders.

On the deepest level this transcribed narrative is an attempt to position Hindus as falling outside the Western scientific community—as pre-modern and mythical in their worldview. But as Cassirer has argued “mythical and verbal thought are interwoven in everyway” (1946: 83). Only through metaphor, Cassirer argues, is one able to see the “unity” and “difference” of the verbal and mythical worlds.<sup>27</sup> In line 22, Mangesh uses an evolutionary metaphor, “the big fish ate the small fish,” to explain the Hindu justification for caste. This metaphor is then discredited as “a very crude form of social Darwinism” (lines 22, 23). Since social Darwinism has a negative connotation, the use of this metaphor is aimed at further discrediting the non-rational un-methodological approach of the other. It provides another example of caste Hindus attempts to justify the inequities of the Indian social system as having a rational basis, but by de-legitimizing it as social Darwinism Mangesh re-positions the view as un-scientific (not founded on the scientific method) and a-historical. In cycling through orienting the listener (lines 3, 6, 7,

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<sup>25</sup> See for instance transcription on line 6 - “more than [one man one vote] what is important is one man one value”.

<sup>26</sup> Harre and Langenhove (1999) remind us that “Positioning always takes place within the context of a specific moral order of speaking” (23).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

9, 11, 12, and 16), developing complicating actions (lines 4, 8, 21, 22, and 23), and evaluating the situation (lines 10, 13, 14, 15, 19, and 20), Mangesh is positioning unscientific culture as detrimental to society and an Ambedkarite re-structuring of society as the only prescription able to correct this flaw. This has the dual effect of legitimizing secular humanism and Buddhist practice. Therefore, only through seeing the failure of current social constructs can change become possible and an Ambedkar Buddhist analysis provides the best lens to identify this failure.

In this context, it is also insightful to return to this narrative paying close attention to pauses and other aspects of speech processes in Mangesh's talk. Such analysis not only tells us more about the speaker, but also about the "reflection-in-action" (Schon, 1983: 21) aspects of scripting the talk to his specific audience. Speaking in English is harder than speaking in his native Marathi dialogue and periods of pause are undoubtedly periods of actively choosing specific words and word phrases suitable for the context and the audience. Invoking Gandhi in line 9—a well-known figure to the American audience—provides a means to understand Mangesh's own identity as inter-related with his minority sense of nationalism. After debunking the ideal of the Rama Raj (Line 10), Mangesh—having equated this idea with the father of Indian nationalism—seems to stumble in finding an adequate example to illustrate the superstitious nature of the caste-based ideal, which underpins this idea. Interestingly, the majority of the long pauses in the transcript which appears above come between lines 11 and 20/21. In these lines Mangesh is jumping between various examples to orient the listener and provide evaluative statements in order to develop a complicating action these listeners can clearly understand. In setting up the Hindu nationalist ideal—exemplified by the well-known personage of Gandhi—Mangesh then challenges this ideal as scientifically un-grounded and superstitious and casts the work of TBMSG as attempting "to challenge those ideas, the 'so-called' religious ideas" (Line 24). Essentializing the idea as ideal, he struggles to find adequate language to express these ideas. Forced to explain through example and analogy, Mangesh invokes a traditional ideal (Rama Raj), a modern discovery (test tube babies), and a scientific theory (Darwinism) as tools to expose the injustice of an irrational social stratification system. His pauses represent rhetorical reassessments of his context and audience, providing a passion and gravity to his speech that mere words could not accomplish. From a Lobovian perspective these pauses represent the struggle to adequately express evaluative statements: of the 10 lines between 11 and 21 five are evaluative statements. The prosody of these lines adds legitimacy to his evaluative statements and helps to play on the Western scientific worldview.

There is nonetheless a sort of revivalist, or anti-modern, element within TBMSG movement narratives. Though they are harkening for a modern scientific worldview, they are also invoking a revival of anti-traditionalist tendencies within the Indian society. Embracing modernity and technology, TBMSG always draws its' narrative back to the historical Buddha—placing the genesis of their thought in a time of antiquity. Such a recourse to an idealized past can be very effective in mobilizing support, as many religious movements have noticed. In this sense, TBMSG's approach is not revolutionary. Notwithstanding, Mangesh's words, as well as the processes through which they evolve into a narrative construct, provide a window into the identity and sense on injustice that TBMSG members feel. By recourse to a constructed past ideal and an unrealized future implementation of that ideal, such speech acts are the foundation of the

TBMSG movement. Simultaneously alienating and cohesive, such speech acts provide the foundation for a reconstructed identity that is coextensive with a sense of injustice. The reconstructed identity acts as a means to express injustice.

### **THE FUTURE OF DALIT ACTIVISM: MIXING OF LOCAL/TRANSNATIONAL STRATEGIES WITH RELIGIOUS/SECULAR GOALS**

Inherent in the promise of these two worldviews is a sort of grounded pragmatism. The mobilization experience, social networks, and common purpose of religious activists, is something that secular dalit right activists can and must tap into. Conversely, the rights-based language of secular dalit rights activists can provide social justice ends that are less ambiguous than the rigorous spiritual practice of individual self-attainment. The following reaction to the celebratory Buddhist conversions of October 2, 2006 by a keen observer of the Ambedkar movement underscores the issues at stake when this connection between secular and religious narrative structures goes unattended and unanalyzed:

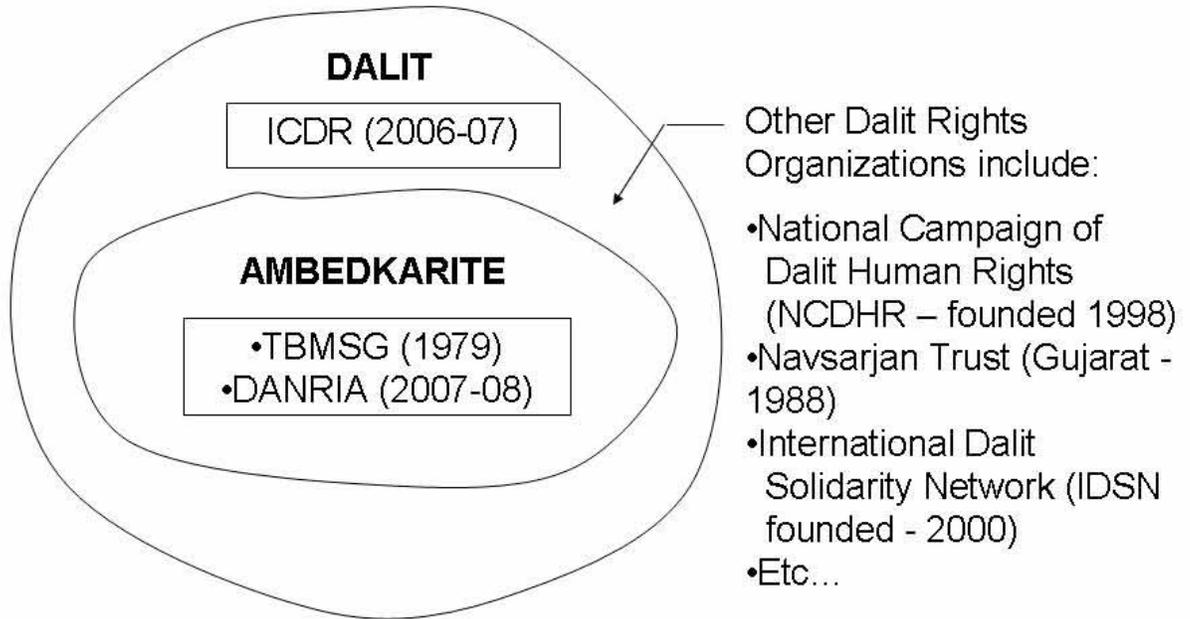
‘What do they mean: All India will become Buddhist?... These people *need to* live in a world with Muslims and Hindus and all the rest. Dr. Ambedkar wanted to reconstruct the Buddhist tradition so it met the needs of his time. But can the Ambedkarites do the same with Ambedkar’s own ideas? Nagaloka [TBMSG’s University] should be teaching comparative religion... They need to say what they are for, and leave aside what they are against.’<sup>28</sup>

The seeming incongruence of dalit identities as either victim or as self-aware Buddhist leaves conceptions of social justice, citizenship, and community vague and unbounded. Hence this lack of balance cries for a syncretism between these often competing narrative frames of social justice—an integrated religious/secular focus on individual rights that does not overlook the importance of individuals’ spiritual worldview in creating social justice. As dalit activists strive for a society open to pluralist ideals they must practice pluralism in the narrative constructions that they deploy. Such a mix of transnational and local strategies for contention redefines the transnational and highlights the need to critically analyze the role of such activists’ narratives in the wider global society.

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<sup>28</sup> Vishvapani (2006), <http://www.ambedkar2006blogspot.com/> - quoting Dr. Chistopher Queen of Harvard on his reaction to Buddhist conversions by TBMSG followers - italics added for emphasis.

APPENDIX A - DALIT RIGHTS MOVEMENT: 1970s – PRESENT<sup>29</sup>



<sup>29</sup> This is not an exhaustive list of organizations involved in the Dalit Rights Movement. Those organizations studied in this paper are placed in the boxes in order to illustrate their relation to each other. The proliferation of Ambedkarite movements for social and political justice is of course much larger than space would allow.

**APPENDIX B: TIMELINE OF SOME IMPORTANT EVENTS IN THE LIFE OF DR. B. R. AMBEDKAR AND THE TBMSG MOVEMENT**

- Born an ‘untouchable’ Mahar (a sub-caste) in Maharashtra State of India, 14<sup>th</sup> April 1891.
- Graduated from high school, 1907 – Only the second ‘untouchable’ to ever do this!
- Awarded an MA from Colombia University in 1915.
- Wrote Castes in India, May 1916.
- Returned to India to serve the Maharaja of Baroda, 1917.
- Founded a small journal called the *Mooknayak* (Leader of the Dumb) in his native language (Marathi), 1920.
- Resigned his governmental post and with financial help from certain reform-minded Brahmins returned to London to get his MS and law degree from University of London, London School of Economics 1920-23.
- Returned to Columbia University and received a Phd., 1926.
- Mahad Conference and Satyagraha march to the Chowdar water tank, March 1927.
- Began publishing a new periodical in his local Marathi language called *Bahishkrit Bharat*, in April, 1927.
- Asked by the British to be a witness on the Simon Commission on constitutional reform, May 1928.
- Nashik Kala Ram temple Satyagraha – trying to get temples to admit ‘untouchables’ or as he called them the scheduled classes, March 1930.
- Representative at Round Table Conference in London, 1930-32.
- Poona Pact of 1932 in which Ambedkar was forced to compromise on the issue of separate electorates for ‘untouchables’ in order to save Gandhi from a death fast.
- Yeola District, Nasik Conference, Ambedkar vows that though unfortunate to be born a Hindu, he would certainly not die one, October 1935.
- Ambedkar writes Annihilation of Caste, 1935-36.
- Writes his “Reply to the Mahatma,” July 1936.
- Helped form Independent Labor Party, August 1936.
- All India Scheduled Caste Federation formed at Nagpur, April 1942.
- Appointed as Labor Minister in the Viceroy's Executive Council, July 1942.
- Wrote What Congress & Gandhi have done to the Untouchables, June 1945.
- Appointed Law Minister in Independent India, August 1947.
- Appointed as Chairman, Drafting Committee of the Constitution of India, August 1947.
- Resigned from Union Cabinet, September 1951.
- Buddhist Society of India formed, May 1955
- Embraced Buddhism, 15<sup>th</sup> October 1956, by taking 22 vows and leading a mass conversion of between 500,000 and 800,000 Mahar ‘untouchables’ to Buddhism.
- Dr. Ambedkar dies, 6<sup>th</sup> December 1956.
- Buddha & His Dhamma, published posthumously 1957.

## APPENDIX C: OVERVIEW OF THE THREE MOVEMENTS COMPARED IN THIS WORK

### The Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha, Sahayak Gana (TBMSG)<sup>30</sup>

- The largest indigenous Buddhist organization on the Indian sub-continent (professes to have over 10 million Indian Buddhist followers)
- Larger than their parent organization the **Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO)** in England.
- Founded in 1967 by Sangharakshita, also founder of the FWBO.
- Much of this modern interest in reviving Buddhism in India can be traced back to three important reform figures, and their religious as well as political thought:
  - Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, architect of the Indian Constitution and ‘untouchable’ leader;
  - Sangharakshita, an English Buddhist monk, and;
  - Lokimitra, one of Sangharakshita’s disciples.
- Stresses a social doctrine and socio-political interpretation of historical Buddhism.
- Basic guiding principle of the TBMSG has been to form a civic-life and community outreach around the idea of a renewed Buddhist *Sangha* (community), as well as, concepts of *Kalayana Mitra* (spiritual friendship) and Dharma as social practice oriented.

Specifically the TBMSG seeks to put the Dharma into practice in three ways:

1. By giving Dharma course lectures;
  2. Through retreats of intensive Buddhist practice and;
  3. Through the creation of Dharma communities in which members work together for the common good of that community.
- TBMSG as a social movement has evolved into many organizational arms, including the following:
    - **The TBM Trust**, the institutional board of the TBMSG movement.
    - **The Bahujan Hitay (BH)** “for the welfare of the many,” the social work wing of the movement. Started in Pune, Maharashtra, **BH** runs community health, cultural, and education projects for the disadvantaged members of society (mainly dalits).
    - **The Jambudvipa Trust**, in taking the ancient Buddhist name for the Indian sub-continent, was founded by Lokamitra to support initiatives that do not easily fit into the TBMSG or BH structure or that could be managed more appropriately in other ways. Among the larger projects of the Jambudvipa Trust are:
      - The Manuski Center – a number of inter-related projects aimed at fostering humanity, compassion, and respect. As advocates, organizers, and agitators the staff of the Manuski Center are engaged in building social awareness among Ambedkar Buddhists and the dalit community more widely. Their activities include

<sup>30</sup> Source: <http://www.tbmsg.org>

organizing inter-caste dialogues, publicizing atrocities against dalits across India, and building networks of dalit rights activists both locally and internationally.

- The Nagarjuna Institute - is a training Institute that Jambudvipa Trust has developed with the help of funds from Taiwanese Buddhists. Their goal is to train people from all over India in Buddhism as well as basic social work. Courses lasting one year have been taking place since 2002. The training is unique in India as it brings together students from all the different parts of India to study the Dharma and how it can be an agent of change in their home communities.

#### **The Dr. Ambedkar Non-Resident Indian Association (DANRIA)**

- Small collaborative group of non-resident dalits living in the United States who have incorporated an NGO in Baltimore, Maryland.
- Their goals are to provide educational assistance and social uplift to dalits living in India.
- They are actively seeking funding for a manual scavengers program in Uttar Pradesh.
- Of the organizations compared in this paper DANRIA is the smallest and least institutionalized and organized.

#### **The International Commission for Dalit Rights (ICDR)<sup>31</sup>**

- In order to promote a global movement in support of Dalit Rights, South Asian and international Dalit leaders as well as activists and supporters held a series of consultation meetings in 2005 and 2006 in Nepal, India, the United States, Geneva and London. These meetings led to a decision to establish for the first time an **International Commission for Dalit Rights** an independent and impartial global forum on Dalit Rights, which was formally launched on March 21, 2006.
- ICDR in association with national and international organizations, forums and development agencies works together or collectively on the issues of inclusive democracy, social justice, human rights and affirmative policies towards Dalit and other social excluded groups in South Asia.
- ICDR is committed to change power relations affecting Dalits in all societies via inclusive democracy and development.
- ICDR supports the movement against inequality, discrimination and poverty both at the local and at the international level.
- ICDR envisions a world where everyone is respected and where each individual has liberty, justice and societal support to address socio-political problems and drive towards democratic transformation.
- ICDR's goal is to promote and protect people who have been facing caste-based (work/descent-based) discrimination, systematic social inequalities, injustice, and extreme poverty around the world, especially in South Asia.

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<sup>31</sup> Source: <http://www.ICDRforum.org>

- The ICDR has a wide range of connection with members, institutions and supporters around the globe, especially in the South Asia.
- The ICDR is a non-profit, non-government and a representative international organization of Dalits, Dalit National Federations/Dalits' Diaspora Organizations which is strongly supported by professional, academia and human rights defenders. The ICDR members participate in its decision-making processes by nominating and electing representatives every three years to its International Governing Council (IGC).
- The ICDR secretariat is located in Washington, D.C. It provides professional expertise and support to the field office, associate/partner organizations, Dalits' rights movements at the local and national level. It is also responsible for fundraising, networking, and campaigning in support of Dalits' rights at the international level.
- Recently, ICDR has developed the Caste Freedom Index (CFI) to provide an interdisciplinary benchmark of global and national human rights and evaluate atrocities committed against the millions of lower caste members worldwide.

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<http://www.ambedkar2006blogspot.com/>

<http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?tab=summary&bill=hc110-139>

<http://www.icdrforum.org/>

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CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

“Dalit Studies Conference” at University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, December 5, 2008.

“Dr. Ambedkar and Developments in the Modern Buddhist World: Network Conference of Buddhist Activists” at Nagaloka, Nagpur, India, September 29-October 4, 2006.

